THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

ARGOSY

OCTOBER, 1955
ONE SHILLING
AND SIXPENCE

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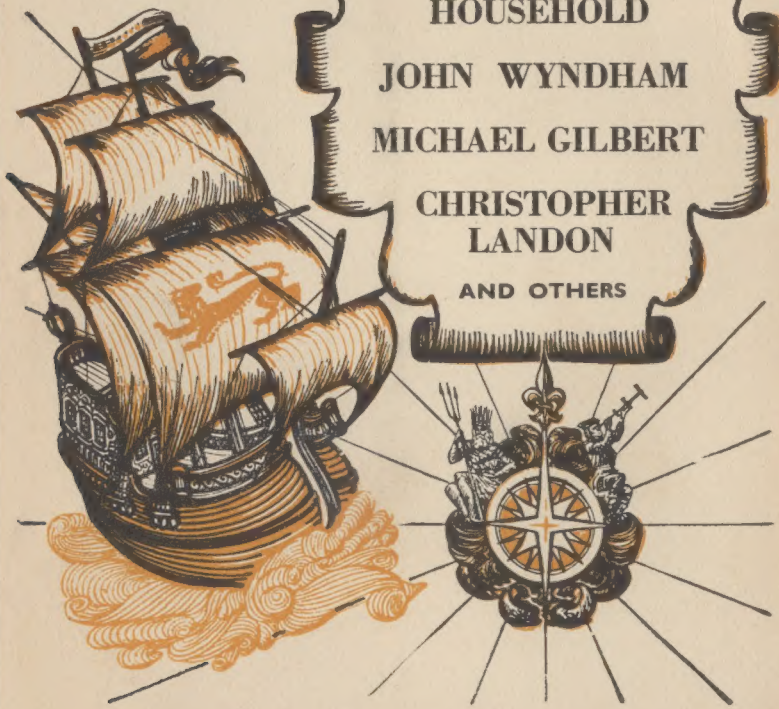

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ARGOSY

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Printed in England by PERCY BROTHERS, LTD., THE HOTSPUR PRESS, MANCHESTER, and published on the 10th of each month by THE AMALGAMATED PRESS, LTD., The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4. Registered for Transmission by Canadian Magazine Post. Subscription Rates: Inland and Abroad: £1 0s. 6d. for 12 months, 10s. 3d. for 6 months. Canada: 19s. 6d. for 12 months, 9s. 9d. for 6 months. ADVERTISEMENT OFFICES: Tallis House, Tallis Street, London, E.C.4. Sole Agents: Australasia, Messrs. GORDON & GOTCH, LTD.; South Africa, CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY, LTD.; Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Messrs. KINGSTONS, LTD.

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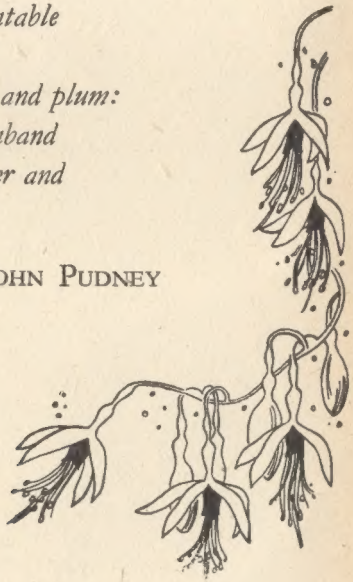
Fuchsias

UNSPELLABLE, unsmellable,
Gaudy, bawdy
Blossoms that droop amd drop
For which my fingers crave,
To fondle and deprave,
To pop:

Uneatable, unbeatable
Glory, gory
Scarlet and puce and plum:
To prance a saraband
Between the finger and
The thumb.

JOHN PUDNEY



TRUST LITTLE AL

BY MICHAEL GILBERT

A CAR stopped ahead of me in Bond Street and Sergeant Cator of the Special Branch looked out. "Hop in," he said. "They want you."

I felt as if the lift had gone down unexpectedly, leaving me on Floor Six and taking my stomach down to the basement with it. I've been doing small jobs for Them for some time—nothing terrifically exciting, errand-boy stuff, really. I ought to have got used to it by now.

When we got there, I was taken straight up to Captain Forestier's office. I know Tony Forestier as well as anyone is allowed to know anyone in that line of business. He is a red-haired, freckled man with light eyes, who stands poised on the balls of his feet as if he's ready to jump out of the window at the drop of a hat. I play quite a lot of squash with him. He's not subtle, but he never stops running.

"We've got something for you," he said, as soon as the door was shut. "Have you ever heard of Alex Baker?"

"Plays centre three-quarter for Richmond," I said, promptly.

"Not this one," said Forestier. "Certainly not this Alex. He's about five foot nothing, looks as if the wind would blow him over, wears glasses, seldom has his hair cut, and doesn't always remember to brush his teeth in the morning."

"Doesn't sound quite my type."

"Nevertheless, you're going to take a holiday with him. And you'll have to stick to him like a long-lost brother."

"What's it all about?"

"In fact, you must never let him out of your sight. We don't insist that you share a bed with him, but your bedrooms must have intercommunicating doors."

"Would you mind telling me why?"

"Since when have you questioned your orders?" I think he saw the light of revolt in my eye, and relented. "It's like this," he said. "That little man is one of the most valuable assets in this country today. Worth—oh, I don't know—a couple of aircraft carriers—the Brigade of Guards—a wing of jet bombers."

" To be on the safe side, why not add them together and throw in the War Office? "

" I'm being serious," said Forestier, coldly. " And unless you're prepared to treat it seriously, I suggest that we're both wasting our time."

" I'm sorry," I said. " But you must admit, it's a tall order. If you say so," I added hastily, " I believe it."

" He's not much to look at, but providence or nature has given him a brain. He's a physicist, and several other things ending with -ist that I can't even spell. Only he's a cut above them all. His mental processes begin where theirs leave off. Penny says that he understands some of what Baker's saying most of the time, but that's as far as he'll go."

" And if something more frightful than the hydrogen bomb exists, it's probably inside his head."

" That's right."

The big red Captain thought hard for a moment, and added, " He's an untidy feeder. And he can't keep his hands off a woman."

" He sounds," I said, " the ideal holiday companion. Why the hell can't you keep him at home? "

" We'd like to keep him in the vaults of the Bank of England. There's stuff there worth a good deal less than he is. Unfortunately, he's not inanimate. He's got to be kept healthy and happy, or his mind won't function properly. Now he's decided that he wants to take a holiday. In Austria. He mustn't be frustrated. So off he goes to Austria. You go with him to keep him out of harm."

" Well . . ." I said.

I supposed I could do it. It was the sort of job I was trained to do. And, in a way, it was obviously a compliment that it had been offered to me.

" When do we start? I could be ready by Saturday—"

" You're going today."

" Hey," I said, " today? But I'm playing in the quarter-finals of the Amateur this afternoon."

" You'll have to scratch."

" I can't just walk out. Think what Hayman will say."

" Colonel Bles chose you himself for this job. Do I understand you are saying no to it? "

I swallowed twice. If Captain Forestier is impressive, his Chief, Colonel Bles, is actually terrifying.

" All right," I said weakly. " I'll have to ring up and tell them I can't play."

" On the assumption that you would agree, I have already

scratched your entry. There is absolutely no time to waste. Baker's train leaves Victoria in half an hour."

"Half an hour! I've got to pack—"

"A suitcase with all the stuff you'll need for the next ten days is already in the train, in the rack above your reserved seat."

"But—"

"I suggest you leave your bowler hat and umbrella here. There is a tweed cap and a raincoat in one of the suitcases. You carry your passport with you, I know."

I nodded.

"Sensible man. So do I. Now, here's the money. And the travellers' cheques. Ticket. Seat reservation. And a list of codes in case we have to communicate. You know the procedure. And—oh yes—there's a gun in your sponge-bag. I've tipped off the customs, so there won't be any trouble. Now, is there anything else you'd like me to do for you?"

Do you know, quite honestly, I couldn't think of anything. Forestier rang his bell, and his girl took charge of me. Cator was still waiting with the car. He'd got rid of the driver and was behind the wheel himself.

"Hop in," he said. "We haven't much time."

He was more right than he knew. We ran into a solid traffic block at Marble Arch, swung into the Park, and got caught behind a procession.

I was sweating a bit by this time. The Office aren't fond of people who miss important trains. "Drive across the grass," I said. "This is special."

"That's all right," said Cator, "we'll make it."

And we did, with less than a minute to spare. I waved to Cator, who grinned back at me, and then the train was moving and I walked down to find my seat.

At first I thought I must have got the wrong reservation tab. Except that this would have been unlike the efficient Forestier who could conjure up clothes and shoes to fit; no doubt my measurements were down somewhere in his elaborate filing system, together with the names of my tailor and bootmaker and hatter.

Then I recognized Alex Baker. He had a corner seat, facing the engine. Mine should have been opposite; I saw the new suitcase in the rack above it, but there was a girl in the seat.

When they saw me looking, the girl said, "Looks like the boy-friend, Al," and they both grinned. Baker said, "Sorry about this, but Gwen decided she couldn't bear to leave me. She had to come down to Dover and kiss me good-bye."

All this in front of the four other occupants of the carriage, who looked down their noses and got on with *The Times* crossword.

" Don't move," I said—Gwen had made no attempt to do so—" I shall be quite happy in the corridor."

The girl was obviously an expensive prostitute. Whether she was anything more remained to be seen.

I found time for a word with Baker as we were drawing into Dover. Gwen had disappeared, and he came out and stood in the corridor with me.

" I'm sorry about that," he said, but would have sounded sorrier if he hadn't been smiling at the same time. " Fact is, she insisted on coming, and it was too late to book a seat for her. Nice of you to let her have yours."

" How long have you known her? " I asked.

" Since last night."

" Did she pick you up, or you her? "

He didn't seem at all put out, but thought the matter over carefully, and said, " I should say she made most of the running. I did wonder if she was all she pretended to be."

" What makes you say that? "

" Bit of an amateur in bed. Too willing."

" I see," I said. " Yes, I thought it might be something like that. When you get to the boat, keep her talking. I've got a phone call to make."

Unfortunately, the train nearly spoilt it by running in late. I had just time to dive for a phone box and ask for one of the numbers I keep in my head but never write down. I told the man who answered what had happened. He would know what to do. Then I ran for it, and got aboard as the gang-plank was going up.

Gwen stood on the quay and waved her wispy handkerchief at us. It was quite affecting.

It's an odd thing, that although I've led a rough sort of life, with a certain amount of excitement in it and plenty of opportunities, I've never really been attracted by women as such. I don't mean matrimony. Some day I'll settle down with the nicest little woman in the world and we'll start a family. But not until I've given up my present job. It's no job for a married man. I'd like to win the Amateur Championship, too, if I can, before I marry.

" Come and have a drink," said Baker. " Or are you going to be sick? "

I must have looked surprised. The sea was like a mirror.

" I can be sick crossing the Thames in a punt," said Baker. " That's why I carry these." He produced a dirty screw of paper

from his waistcoat pocket. I could see some white tablets in it.

" You'd do much better," I said, " not to think about it at all."

" It's nothing to do with thought," he said crossly. " Seasickness starts in your semicircular canals." He gave me a lecture on this, most of which was Greek to me; but it lasted us safely into Calais.

There's nothing much to report about the next twenty-four hours. We shared a two-berth sleeper on the Arlberg Express. Captain Forestier was quite right: Baker didn't clean his teeth, either going to bed or getting up. Apart from that, he was fairly inoffensive. I think I'm quite an easy chap to get on with. Anyway, all I had to do was listen.

" I'm a thinker," he said to me after dinner. " You remember Sherlock Holmes? That's stupid, most of it. None of his analyses holds water, you know. Not if you really examine it." Then he quoted about three pages of one of the stories, verbatim as far as I could tell, and pulled it to pieces. It was quite an amusing performance.

" That's all very well," I said, " but could you do any better yourself? "

" Certainly. But it takes time, like all real scientific processes. The mistake is in calling it deduction. It isn't deduction at all. Just trial and error, trial and error, until the error gets less and less. When it finally vanishes altogether, why, you've got a fact."

He was still at it when we turned the light out in the sleeper that night.

We changed at Schwarzach and got to Velden after tea next day. The hotel, which was on the south shore of the Wörthersee,—a big, attractive lake—seemed, to my simple mind, to offer all the heart could desire: bathing, boating, and woods and mountains behind it for walking and climbing.

Baker's idea of fun was to lie in the sun all day and get drunk in the evenings. After that, I've no doubt he would have liked one of the women. There were plenty about.

I kept him on the straight and narrow the first evening by dint of stopping with him the whole time until I had him safely in his bedroom and heard his distinctive snore. It sounded like a circular saw making slow progress through a tough old plank, hitting a knot every now and then.

Next morning I got a long cable. It appeared to come from a firm of wine merchants—that, by the way, is nominally my business—and there was a lot in it about purchases and prices and vintages. It was one of those mechanical codes that you

" set " on a Duplex Rotator: simple enough if you've got the machine and the right keys, but almost unbreakable without.

It directed me to go to Klagenfurt and make the acquaintance of a Franz Gelert, who kept a bookshop and circulating library in the square.

I gave Baker a straight talk before I left, telling him, in his own interests, to avoid strangers and stick to solo sunbathing. " You're within less than fifty miles," I said, " of people who have probably only two ideas about you. The first and better would be to kidnap you. But, if they couldn't do that, it would suit them almost as well to knock you on the head."

" Don't you worry about me," he said. His nose was bright red from the sun and he looked more than usually pleased with himself. " Little Al's quite capable of looking after himself. Brains always beat brawn."

I said nothing to this, but hurried off to catch the bus into Klagenfurt.

I found Gelert. He was a nice little man. He'd been doing his undercover job ever since the Occupation in 1945, and evidently knew his way about. We discussed a number of plans for coping with Baker, but they all suffered from the same defect.

" It's simply impossible to tell what he's going to do next," I said. " I've no doubt he's very clever—scientifically, I mean —but in the affairs of this life he's got about as much sense as a spaniel puppy. Added to which he's got the morals of a rabbit."

Old Gelert peered at me through his glasses and said, " I could get you help, of course. Quite a lot of help, if necessary. But we don't want to be obvious. What about Trude? Could she do anything? "

I'd been conscious of Trude in the background for some time. She was blonde, pink and white, and looked as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

" She's quite—quite reliable," said Gelert. " And she's older than she looks. Do you think if, perhaps, we could concentrate his roving affections on her, it might make our path smoother? "

I didn't like the idea at all. Damn it, if I'd had a daughter she'd have been about that age. Besides, in my view, women always complicate these transactions. However, the advantages of the plan were too obvious to need underlining.

" Fix her a room at the hotel," I said. " There's no harm in trying. We'd better not go back together. Let her turn up in time for dinner this evening."

I had lunch in Klagenfurt and got back to the hotel about the middle of the afternoon. Baker was not in his room, nor in any of the public rooms. I tackled the manageress.

" Ah yes," she said. " Herr Baker. You will find him, I think, at the bathing-beach. There is an attraction, you understand," and she positively winked.

My heart sank. " Who is it? " I said. " Tell me the worst."

" Frau Hodinger. She is not, perhaps, everyone's choice. You saw her at dinner last night. The brunette."

I had, indeed, seen her; her appearance was not designed to escape notice. A woman of thirty-five, dressed to ape twenty-five, with a face—what we could see of it under its coat of make-up—as hard as the crags of the Karawanken mountains, which filled the sky to the south of the hotel.

I made my way down to the private bathing-beach. There was a good deal of human flesh about, anonymous in its nudity; but a bright pink nose and pair of gleaming steel spectacles were nowhere to be seen. Nor the brunette. I cursed under my breath. If the opposition had got hold of him they had moved with extraordinary speed. It was not impossible but—

" Your friend would seem to be enjoying himself," said a voice in my ear.

I followed the pointing finger, and my blood froze. There were a number of cockleshell boats with outboard motors belonging to the hotel. One of them lay about four hundred yards out, rocking dangerously. A fight, or a sham fight was being waged on that shaky platform, between England's top scientist and a hard-faced brunette.

Even as I watched, they went over the side, the brunette on top.

Mercifully, at the jetty there was an empty boat, which started at the first tug. By the time the fighters surfaced I was almost halfway there. My concern proved to be absolutely unnecessary. Alex swam like a fish. It was the brunette who needed rescuing. His idea of fun was to swim below her, catch her ankle, and pull her under. She had had enough of this when I came up, and she climbed thankfully into my boat.

Baker made a rude gesture at me. " Since you've butted in," he said, " you can bloody well make yourself useful and bring my boat back." And he started on a slovenly crawl to the beach, leaving me speechless.

I didn't see him again until dinner that night. I was resigned to an uncomfortable meal; either a blat about my behaviour that afternoon or an interminable lecture on some obscure branch of physics. What I was not prepared for was silence.

I don't mean that he was sulky. He just ate his food and drank his wine in a normal, companionable way. We were drinking our coffee when he said, " Don't you think she's marvellous? Perhaps she's a film star. I think she must be a star."

"Who are you talking about?" I said, screwing my head round for I had my back to the room.

"The blonde, of course. I haven't been able to take my eyes off her all dinner. I thought you were making eyes at her in the mirror."

"Certainly not!" I said indignantly. "Who?" And then I saw Trude. She'd done something to her face, and in a low-cut evening dress she looked a mile removed from the ingénue I had talked to in the shop that morning.

"I thought you were keen on Frau Hodinger," I said.

"That bag," said Baker, gracefully. "Where do you think my eyes are? Now, there *is* a girl. Looks lonely, too. Little Al must remedy that."

I see from my report that the next seven days were comparatively peaceful.

I had the chance of a word with Trude one morning. Baker had gone into Klagenfurt to do some shopping, and Trude had somehow managed to get out of going with him. It was the first time they had been separated for a week.

"He's a funny little man," she said. "I'm not at all sure that he knows what he does want."

"I'll give you three guesses," I said.

"Oh, he'd like to sleep with me, yes. And no doubt plans to do so. But he is more complex than you think. He tells you so often what a remarkable brain he has that you naturally come to disregard it. But he really has got a brain, you know."

"So I'm told. Most of what he says goes over my head. I never got further at school than making smells in test-tubes."

"I don't mean science. One evening, he suddenly pointed to a fat little man—you know, the one with the daughters, who plays patience in the corner—and said, 'That man was in a concentration camp during the war.' I said, 'Did he tell you?' Al said, 'No, I've never spoken to him.' He'd got it all worked out from the way the old boy behaved, and what he did and what he didn't do."

I passed over that one and went back. "You say he's planning to sleep with you?"

"Of course. That is what he is doing in Klagenfurt. He has extracted from me a promise that I will dine with him at the Haus Lord Byron on Thursday night—that is your last night here. I expect he has booked rooms for us—you know, in case we miss the last bus back. Separate rooms, of course."

"I see." It seemed to worry me a good deal more than her.

"Then he will get me drunk. I expect he is now bribing the

wine waiter to put some brandy into my white wine at dinner."

" I'll attend to that," I said grimly. " You've done your part well, and we don't want any complications at the end of it."

" I am certain I can rely on you," she said. I wished I could have been as certain myself.

I went to Klagenfurt that afternoon and had a word with Gelert. After all, he was one of the people who was going to get hurt if it went wrong. He said, " I could have friends on hand with a car, in case he gets violent."

" I think he'll go quietly," I said. " I shall be on hand myself. I've taken a room in a pension that overlooks the hotel."

We chewed it over a bit more; but without knowing exactly what Baker's plans were, it was difficult to do more than guard against contingencies.

I think I can truthfully say that Thursday night was one of the most baffling and, in its outcome, most extraordinary nights I have ever spent. I watched Baker's preliminary manœuvres with a good deal of amusement. First he had to get rid of Frau Hodinger, who seemed to have an idea that he'd promised that evening to go dancing with *her*. I saw him in the distance, having a lengthy and rather heated conversation with her. Then he had to sidetrack me. He served me up a carefully modified version of the truth.

" I'm taking Trude out for a meal at the Klub Kondoterei," he said somewhat truculently, " and we don't want an armed guard." I looked doubtful. " It's the biggest public restaurant in Klagenfurt," he said, " and I've hired a car to take us back to the hotel afterwards. So stop worrying."

Although I already knew the exact position of the table for two that he'd booked at the Haus Lord Byron and the numbers of the rooms he had reserved for the night, I managed to preserve a reasonably straight face. " You've behaved like a sensible chap so far. Don't go blotting your copybook on your last night."

" Trust little Al," he said.

Like hell I trusted him. I gave him a short start that evening and then set out myself. The bus into Klagenfurt was full of the usual evening crowd, who'd been toasting themselves in the sun all day and were now making for the bright lights and music. Nevertheless, something was not quite right.

After a time, in my job, you get an instinct about these things. There were at least two men in the bus who had no particular reason for being there. And they both got out at the same stop as I, and although they walked straight off, I realized that I was under observation.

I did my best, in the next hour, to shake off any watchers, but

it's a difficult thing to be sure about in a strange town, particularly when you have no idea how many people are in the game.

I was pretty certain, nevertheless, that there was no one behind me when I got into the pension and went up to the room I had booked. It was ideally situated. I could look down right into the front dining-room of the Haus Lord Byron, and since Alex and Trude had chosen a table in the window, I could follow the meal, bite by bite.

I nibbled a packet of digestive biscuits and watched the poulet au riz follow the côtelettes de saumon Pojarski and the canapés follow the poulet au riz, washed down by first one bottle, and then a second of Schloss Johannisberg. When the third bottle arrived I walked over to the wash-stand and helped myself to a swig from the fine old vintage water in the carafe.

It was a leisurely sort of meal. I am not sure whether Baker had made special arrangements about this, but by the time they had reached their coffee and liqueurs, the dining-room was pretty nearly empty and I saw from my watch that it was eleven.

The last bus out to Velden left at ten-thirty.

Something of the sort seemed to have occurred to Trude. I could follow the pantomime as from the front row of the stalls. Nothing was left out. The waiter summoned to fetch a time-table. The head waiter brought into consultation. *No, it was very difficult indeed to get a car at that time of night.* The manager's arrival on the scene. *Most fortunately, they had got two single rooms.* Great relief all round. A second liqueur.

Any moment now, I thought. I went down softly into the front hall of the pension and looked out into the street.

About fifty yards away, midway between street lights, a large closed car was drawn up to the kerb. I felt a sudden constriction of the throat, a quickening of the pulse. I looked across the street into the uncurtained window of the dining-room.

Alex and Trude had gone.

Their reserved rooms, as I knew, were at the back of the hotel on the first floor. I had to take a chance on being seen. As quickly and as quietly as possible, I stepped across the street and into the alley at the side of the hotel. As I reached it, I had the impression, from a quick backward glimpse, that the closed car had started to move up.

I edged along the alley, turned the corner, and looked up.

That was when I got the surprise of the evening; for the first thing I saw was a pair of legs. They were waving out of an open first-storey window. As I watched, the groping feet found the ledge, and more of the climber came into view.

My first idea, that someone was climbing in at the

window, was wrong. On the contrary, someone was coming out.

I must have been so engrossed in watching that I had no attention to spare for anything else. That was a mistake.

The smallest sound behind me; and the impression that the corner-stone of the hotel had fallen on my head.

I came back to life to the noise of thudding. A lot of it was inside my head, but some of it was actually happening, too.

Someone was knocking on a door. On my bedroom door.

I was in my room at the hotel. Just for a moment I thought that the whole of the events of the night before had been a crazy dream. Then I put my hand up and felt the back of my head.

It was no dream. Someone had knocked me cold and had then brought me back to Velden, taken off my coat and shoes, and tucked me nicely up under the coverlet before leaving me.

The only way to stop the knocking was to say, " Come in."

The manageress came in. She was normally completely poised, but some of her composure seemed for the moment to have deserted her. " I trust you will remember," she said, " that the bus leaves at three."

" The bus? "

" The bus for the train. If you miss the four-o'clock train at Klagenfurt you will not catch your connection at Schwarzach."

I looked at my watch. My God, it was nearly two o'clock. " Come in," I said, " and shut the door."

I sat up on the bed. " Who brought me home last night? "

" The police. You fell in Klagenfurt and hit your head."

I ignored this. " You must get them at once," I said. " It's desperately urgent. It doesn't matter about me. But Herr Baker has disappeared."

" Disappeared? "

" Kidnapped, I fear." The woman simply stood there, staring at me. Then I heard it, too. From the next-door room. The unmistakable sound of little Al's snoring.

We caught the train with nothing to spare, and it wasn't until we were alone in our carriage, turning north towards Innsbruck, that I said, " I think the time has come for some explanations."

Neither of us was feeling or looking our best. I had to carry my cap, and still found it wiser not to move my head more than necessary. Alex looked as if he was suffering from the hangover of all time. " There's nothing to explain," he said sulkily.

" That won't do," I said. " I want to know what happened last night. Who coshed me? And who brought me back to the hotel? Where is Trude? And what happened to you? "

I thought for a moment Alex was going to sulk; then a smile

broke through. But it wasn't a nice smile. "Mind over matter," he said. "Remember? I suppose it never even occurred to you that Trude was a Russian stooge."

I swallowed hard, and said, "What makes you think that?"

"It was pretty obvious, wasn't it? Her opportune appearance the day after we arrived. The way she made a dead set at me."

"Go on," I said weakly.

"That's the sort of thing *you* were expected to guard me against, you know. I didn't expect to have to do all the work myself. However, Frau Hodinger was a help. She's got influence, that woman. Her brother's in the Security Police."

"I see," I said. It was beginning to sink in.

"I thought I'd lead Trude up the garden path a bit. It was quite safe. There were squads of police on duty. Some of the other side too, I think. I understand there was a carload of thugs waiting down the street for Trude to give the sign that I was ripe for the picking."

"I saw them," I said.

"The only trouble was that when the police spotted you pussy-footing off round the back of the hotel, they jumped to the conclusion that *you* were a member of the opposition. And laid you out. Of course, I put them right, and they brought you home."

"It was *you* climbing out of the window?"

"That's right. I'd got an urgent date."

"Who with?" I asked. But I knew.

"Frau Hodinger," said Al. "Give me a woman of experience every time." The train dived into a tunnel and saved me the necessity of answering.

I reported to Captain Forestier when I got back. He seemed amused. "I hope you were tactful," he said. "That's the great thing in these assignments. Tact."

"I think I behaved as a gentleman should," I said stiffly.

"You've brought him back safe and sound, anyway. I only hope he gives you a good chitty to Colonel Bles."

As a matter of fact, Alex was talking to Colonel Bles about me at that very moment. I only discovered this, of course, long afterwards. The Colonel has a long face, looks like a bank manager, and is about the most ruthless man I have ever had anything to do with—and I've known some in my time.

"I'm sorry," he was saying, "we always thought him a sound operator. Not much imagination, but reliable."

"I did wonder," said Alex. "I mean, what exactly your opinion of him was. All that business about not giving him any warning that he was coming with me. Was that because you couldn't trust him not to blab?"

" Purely a routine precaution. The later he knew about it all, the less harm he could do if he did happen to be indiscreet."

" I see. Nothing more to it than that? "

The Colonel looked at him curiously. " No," he said. " No. Should there have been? "

" I've got a peculiar sort of brain-box," said Alex. " There were one or two things. The first was at Dover. You know that girl you put on to watch over my last hours in England—Gwen What's-her-name? "

The Colonel smiled. " Yes," he said. " Yes, I know her."

" Well, your little boy scout was very suspicious of her. Very suspicious indeed. More or less told me she was an enemy agent. And so she could have been. But *if* he suspected her, why didn't he just put the local police on to her? Why nearly miss the boat in an effort to telephone London? Especially as he told me himself he had some foolproof method of communicating with you from Austria. I mean to say, either something had to be done about Gwen quick, in which case get the local boys working; or else it was just something to be checked up on some time, in which case send a code message to your office. Nearly missing the boat telephoning London didn't add up either way."

" No," said the Colonel. " No. What was your idea? "

" First I thought he just wanted an excuse for a last minute talk to one of his girl-friends, but he doesn't have girl-friends. So it could be that he was passing on something to someone who could use it."

" Yes," said the Colonel. " Yes. Anything else? "

" Well, the second day at Velden he got a long cable and retired to his room to read it. And burnt it as soon as he'd finished with it. *Did* any of your people send him a cable? "

" I can find out," said the Colonel. " What next? "

" If you find that they didn't, my guess would be that it came from the people he took all that trouble to telephone from Dover. Perhaps they put him on to a contact at Klagenfurt. That would make sense of a good deal that happened afterwards. It's none of my business, but if I were you I should have a thorough security check on that young man. I think he's an enemy agent."

And the devil of it was, of course, that he was quite right.

★ *" Fifty words," came the voice of Michael Gilbert, " fifty words about* me *? " Our telephone crackled joyously. " I've a wife, four daughters,* 0, 2, 4, *and* 6."—*" Years? " we queried—" Years," he affirmed. " We believe in maintaining a steady flow of production—an old rectory in Kent, an office in Lincoln's Inn, and a* beautiful *bowler hat ! "*

★ *A young American who made a brilliant début in this country with her novel, "The Love Eaters," Mary Lee Settle comes from the Southern States, and though she now lives in London, it is the South that forms the framework and the heart of her writing, both in her most recent novel, "The Kiss of Kin," and in this delightful new short story—her first to appear in England.*

HAUNTED SUMMER

BY MARY LEE SETTLE

THAT summer was weighted down with heat, so hot that the grown people stayed indoors most of the time, or sat on the long verandah and slowly rocked back and forth, fanning themselves, trying to push the heat away from their faces.

That was the summer my grandmother went spiritualist.

I was ten. I spent the first part of the summer being wonderfully frightened by slipping into her room, and reading *Ghost Stories* or *True Spiritual Experiences* or *Voices from Beyond.* I would sit in the corner in the afternoon, for she was never there then, she always slept in the hammock on the downstairs back porch.

There in the half-dark, in the cool half-dark (for the blinds were drawn against the heat outside), the room was deep green, strangely larger than when the sun was allowed in, and it had the still silence of a room waiting—or asleep. Her big rocker would be empty, but the overstuffed seat was bent with use so that it didn't seem empty.

Against the wall stood the huge bed that my Aunt Phemie had died in; my Aunt Eliza said she lingered for months after and that the hole never healed at all, not from the time they brought her home. The big bed sank in the middle, too, and that too seemed occupied, occupied by—I was learning a new language—ectoplasm and heat.

There I would sit with my back tight against the wall, for

what I could see I didn't fear so much, and I would read from the dusky pulp magazines about the ever-recurring spot on the floor, made by the drowned sailor, or stories about *Things* that weren't anything but seemed made of flesh and slithered under the study door and crawled onto the study desk where the man who was writing the story used to sit.

It was during this story, fittingly enough, that my Aunt Sophia opened the door slowly, softly, in the quiet of the afternoon, and caught me at my grandmother's magazines. I was so scared by her that I didn't even feel the whipping.

The angular, railed stairs, climbing the sides of the square hall-well all the way from the bottom of the house to the attic, were the next most scaring part of the house. Each step towards the attic was more frightening than the one before, so frightening that I, certainly, and most of my cousins used to shirk going up them alone towards evening, and if we had to, to bed or to fetch my aunt's glasses, we used to run up as fast as we could.

My Aunt Melissa used to get sick headaches, and when we would pound up the stairs she would call out from behind the door of the front big bedroom, where you could hear her pacing up and down, " I'll declare, you kids are trying to set me crazy. Stop that everlasting noise."

There were nineteen of us—all first cousins.

My Aunt Prissy said it was " youthful spirits."

We all knew it was a *Something*, a something that stayed in the attic; at least I knew it was that kind of spirit and not youthful spirits. I couldn't have said what the thing looked like. But I suspected that It had a long arm that could reach all the way down the stairwell.

But It wasn't the first bad thing about the stairs. At the first landing, staring sternly straight down the stairs, was a sepia enlargement from a daguerreotype of my great-grandmother.

My great-grandmother would fasten her eyes right on mine and she would watch me steadily as I came towards her, and as I would turn the corner of the stair so that my back was half to her, she would drill her eyes right through my back, and as I would walk along the upstairs hall she would follow me with her disapproving, know-it-all eyes, and she would never take her eyes off me. Once I thought I imagined it and turned around, but sure enough, there she was, staring straight at me.

I was sure there wasn't a thing my great-grandmother, who had died about 1870, didn't know about me. She used to come and stand over my bed at night, and just as she was ready to say something, I would wake up and yell, " Mamma! Mamma! "

There was a strong family resemblance between my mother

and her. My mother would tell me to come into her room and I would sleep the rest of the night in there.

But that was out of the frying-pan into the fire, not that it wasn't lovely having company after a nightmare, but she always thought that bad dreams were caused by something you ate, and that might mean castor oil in the morning, if she remembered. There were usually three or four aunts in the big kitchen when I took castor oil and they would all watch me, twisted around from whatever they were doing, and say, " Come on. Get it over with."

I had it in my orange juice.

I know now that my great-grandmother stared at me because she was looking straight into the camera when the picture was taken, but it still doesn't help. I'll bet the photographer repented of his sins after he took that picture.

But when I turned again, out of her sight, on the way to the attic stairs, It took over and then I was sorry she couldn't look all the way around the last corner before the attic. She could have handled It. I couldn't.

It used to watch me as I came up the last flight, and as my head got level with the floor of the attic, It used to recede back behind—behind the trunks or one of the pictures or somewhere so I couldn't see It, and watch from there.

The attic had long dangerous windows, almost to the floor, and the aunts would say sometimes, or my grandmother would say, " I'll declare, we ought to do something about the attic windows; one of the children is going to fall out one of these days."

But they never did do anything about them.

They didn't know that we would never have gone near the windows for fear It would slip up behind us and push us out. Sometimes, on dares, the older ones would lure us up to the attic and we would sit along the beds; there were six beds in rows along opposite walls; we would sit and be told terrible stories about ghosts or sex.

It was during one of those, one evening—I forget now whether it was ghosts or sex, both were horrible—that I got so frightened that I made a bee-line for the steps and fell down them, right to my grandmother's feet.

She liked me best and sat and patted me until I felt better, then she ramped up to the attic, and cleared out all the cousins. They all accused me of telling her something, but I didn't tell her anything.

Of course, once I had reached the attic after climbing all the

way up in terror, it wasn't quite so frightening—at least not in the daytime. (I've not been up there at night to this day.)

It was a long, sunny room, divided by a partition, and all the beds were along the walls for when more relatives came. I can't think who the more relatives could have been; it was during the depression and all the relatives anybody ever heard of seemed to live in the big house or in one of the tenant houses around it. But, anyway, they stayed ready. Sometimes my grandmother would put preachers up there who had come to revival meetings. But usually they were empty.

On one side of the partition were trunks; Aunt Phemie's trunk with all her dead clothes in it; Uncle Hamilton's trunk with his name and regiment painted on it from the last war; two trunks full of the Harvard Classics; a trunk full of my Aunt Tolly's old ruffly clothes and parasols and big hats—she never threw anything away; a trunk full of big written-in books that looked old and legal; and some letters with faded ribbons, and brown ink that had once been blue.

There were lots of letters, but no love-letters; that's what I was looking for. They all seemed to be about property. All my aunts ever talked about was property, so I guess that's all the family ever wrote about, too. There were several other trunks, but I couldn't get them opened. The locks were too good.

On the other side of the partition was an old white wash-stand, a small bed with a bright patchwork quilt on it that my grandmother had made, and a chair—a rocking-chair, its seat very close to the floor. On the wall was a large framed picture of the Prince of Wales holding a Scottie in his arms.

My Aunt Amelia had cut it out of a magazine when she was in love with the Prince of Wales, but after she got over it, it was moved to the attic, and everybody forgot about it but me. I used to go and look at it, seeing a lot of things about him that were different from ordinary people.

So all these things were why I went to the attic sometimes, even if It did watch me climb the stairs. All the things I discovered in the haunted summer after I wasn't allowed in my grandmother's room to read what Aunt Pinkie called "those trashy books."

She was standing in the doorway of the attic partition. I was aware of her as my head rose above the floor level, as I sneaked up to the attic one day. My heart bounded out of me like a frightened frog. It hadn't been an it at all. It was a She. My eyes slowly travelled up to her face, fascinated with horror, half expecting no face to be there.

She had a face. It was dead white; a large face stretched over a square frame of bone. The cheekbones were a straight ledge for her staring black eyes. It was an old face, an almost old face. Although the lips were tight shut, they sank in at places where there weren't any teeth.

She was dressed in a faded blue Mother Hubbard with little white lozenges all over it, like the material people used to make aprons and poke-bonnets out of, or dresses for charity. Most of her hair was behind her, I couldn't see it, but I knew it was very long, because one lanky strand of it fell down the side of the white face, fell down in a long strand all the way to her waist. It was dead black.

A year before I would have known that what I feared so long in the attic, what I had finally come face to face with was a witch. But now that I was spiritualist, I knew what she was. Ectoplasm.

For once my stout pair of lungs failed me. I backed very slowly, never taking my eyes off her, and she didn't disappear. She didn't disappear, and slowly her mouth began to spread into a smile.

I had a glimpse of one long tooth, and then I turned and ran like lightning—sure she was after me, feeling her long arm stretching after me—down the stairs, past my great-grandmother, through the hall, out to the back porch, slammed the door, and woke my grandmother, over the back yard, scattering chickens. Francy, the bulldog, saw me running and thought it was a game. She ran beside me until we reached the garden.

There, in the middle of the sunny field, on the hot, dry ground, I sat down at last, protected by rows of bean poles.

The panic began to ebb out of me as I realized I was not being followed. There I sat in the sun, patting Francy's head, and wondering.

Unseen things are always more terrible than those seen. I was almost relieved. I had seen It at last, and It was a woman, a woman with lanky black hair. I wondered if she'd been killed and was really in one of the locked trunks. Maybe one of my aunts—oh no, someone outside my own family must have done it and just sent it there and nobody knew. No one but me.

I knew very well, due to my reading in my grandmother's room, that it was no ordinary thing to see ectoplasm. I was pizic. I framed the word at last that I had only read and had never mentioned to a soul—the magic power! I knew I was not as other girls. At last I knew why. It was a great thrill.

Of course, I knew there was no use telling anyone else. After all, I told myself, if they had been able to, they would have seen

her long since. Only me. How wonderfully terrible. Maybe she was trying to communicate with me!

I looked up at some of my aunts, moving around the kitchen while we were having supper that night, and thought how little they understood.

I knew I could have shared the terrible secret with my grandmother, but I didn't have time that night. It was Friday. She went to church.

I was very surprised that I had no dreams. Life was let down, a little ordinary, almost as usual, except for the secret. I kept expecting extraordinary things to happen. But nothing did.

By the next morning—that was Saturday—I wasn't even sure about the power. I went through the morning full of delicious foreboding, knowing that I was going to have to test it again. Wild horses couldn't have dragged my old self up the stairs if I'd suspected such a thing was there. Wild horses couldn't have kept my new powered self away.

I couldn't go in the morning because Saturday morning was busy, and it was only with a great deal of planning that I could shirk being put to work on chores. I went down beyond the railway bridge to the stream for most of the morning with Francy, and hid until the afternoon when everyone would be dozing, or so languid with heat they couldn't be bothered with me.

To tell the truth, I was afraid someone else would have the power, and I didn't want to share my secret with just anybody.

In the still of the afternoon, I climbed the stairs again, round past my great-grandmother, up the attic steps, feeling that the black eyes were already staring at me. But when I reached the top, keeping a watch to run in case she moved towards me, the partition door was closed. I dared going there to see, but I wasn't brave enough to dare action. I couldn't reach forward and open the door.

I went slowly down the steps again, disappointed, looking behind me for fear of her long arm, all the way to the front verandah.

Sunday morning was easy. Nobody got up until late, and the house was very quiet when I slipped out of bed. I waked up at the stillest part of the morning, planning and stirring my courage up in case the door was shut.

I didn't get it stirred up enough until about nine o'clock. Everybody who was up was in the big kitchen having breakfast. The morning seemed washed and the sound of all the bickering in the kitchen and the chores being done and the chickens

scraping over food was rising up through the still air as I mounted the stairs, so I just couldn't feel very frightened. I tried. I was afraid no one could be pizic on such a bright Sunday morning. Even my great-grandmother seemed less intent on me.

As I started up the last flight of stairs to the attic, I heard a new sound, and a thrill tinkled through me. It was the weak sound of singing. She—I knew it was she—was singing. How terrible! I kept on climbing. My head was above the floor of the attic, and I saw that the door was open.

She was sitting in the rocking-chair, facing the door, with her knees spread out under the Mother Hubbard. Her lanky hair was let down and lay in a black tangle around her shoulders and over her floppy bosom. She held a brown book in one hand. It looked like a Bible.

In her other hand was a bottle of corn whisky with a horseshoe on the label. Her face was red and damp, and bleached-looking in spots. Sweat stood out all along her forehead and made her hair stick. She was singing—slobbering and singing, rocking back and forth. She slobbered and sang, "*I was washed in the blood of the Lamb.*"

She didn't even see me.

I didn't start to cry until I got to the second floor. Then I felt my face go hot and begin to twist. I couldn't help it. I just couldn't help it. Aunt Emiline came out of her bedroom door and saw me. She said, "Good lord a' mercy, what's the matter? Are you sick?"

But I couldn't tell her what was the matter. I couldn't tell anybody what was the matter, not even my grandmother.

When some of the aunts were standing around later, after I'd thrown up and was beginning to feel better and enjoy being in bed, Aunt Phorena said, "If it ain't one damn thing, it's two. What with having mother's medium in the attic in what mother thinks is a trance, and the children obviously coming down with something, it's too much, just too much."

I knew what a medium was. I knew all about that.

Mamma saw I was paying attention and asked me again what hurt. I couldn't think of anything to say. I didn't want to get my grandmother into trouble with all my aunts, so I said it was my leg that hurt.

My Aunt Eliza said it was growing-pains.

★ ★ ★

Of course the game is worth the candle, but it is often better played without one.

KATHERINE MANSFIELD

★ *When a sea-dog picks on a cat, it's trouble ahoy! Except for this author—a radio officer—for whom "Cat's-Paw" won a first prize in the Seafarers' Education Service short story competition.*

CAT'S-PAW

BY W. S. MONEY

THE ship was ready to leave and we were having a smoke while waiting for the pilot, when Charlie noticed his bunk.

"Blimey, I 'ate cats!" he fumed. "Just look at my counterpane, dirty paw-marks all over the place."

"Strewth!" said Slim, his room-mate, "I thought we'd got rid of 'em all in London. Is this another one, then?"

"No, it isn't another one," snapped Charlie testily, "it's that big ugly stinker from last trip. As fast as we put 'im on the dock, 'e jumped back aboard. There's on'y one way to get shut of 'im: chuck 'im over the wall one dark night at sea.

"That's the one we called Tiger. He's a tough baby. If you threw 'im over the side, 'e'd crawl back aboard—even the sharks wouldn't tackle 'im." Charlie did his best to wipe the sooty marks from his freshly changed bed-linen. "That's where 'e's goin' if I get 'old of 'im. I've enough trouble with cats at 'ome, I come to sea to get away from 'em."

"Cats, Charlie?" queried Slim. "I thought you on'y 'ad one?"

"And what the 'ell do yer think me sister-in-law is?" snorted Charlie, with heavy sarcasm. "A 'uman bein'? And that tabby at 'ome is just such another as Tiger. She's looked after like a bloomin' queen: she's on'y got to miaow to get a saucer o' milk poured out—and that's after bein' out on the tiles all night, bawlin' 'er fat 'ead off along of every tom-cat from 'ere to Aldgate. She's got more right in the 'ouse than I 'ave. If I turf 'er out of me own chair she spits at me, and every time I go 'ome I 'ave the job of gettin' rid of a batch of 'er kittens. I'll poison 'er one of these 'days, mark my words!

"But the wife's sister—blimey! 'Charles,' she says—she calls me Charles." Charlie's voice switched to a querulous falsetto. "'Don't say blimey, Charles. It's uncouth!'"

His voice slipped back to its normal croak. "Proper misery.

Yer can't open yer trap without she tells yer what yer said wrong. Yer know, Slim, 'er-sister-married-beneath-'er sort of style."

"Cheer up," Slim laughed. "Perhaps she'll get wed one day, and yer'll be rid of 'er."

"Lizzie get married? Fat chance! No man'd 'ave 'er, the crabby old witch."

Then the Bosun's bellow reverberated along the alleyway. "Stand by, yer lot o' sojers." So we turned to, let go the ropes, and set off on another voyage.

The trip wasn't a long one, only to Brazil and back. Tiger stayed with us all the way; he'd made the ship his home, and no one was going to evict him. Not by putting him ashore, anyway, and though he was disliked by most crew members, no one gave him a passage overside.

He was a great arrogant, supercilious brute, and cared for neither man nor beast. You would find him parked in your room —having already been thrown out of someone else's—curled up in the softest, most comfortable spot on settee or bunk. "Hey, Tiger, scram!" No sign. Shake him thoroughly and he might open one baleful eye, an eye with a fierce glint that plainly said, "Scram yourself, Buster!" and go back to his dreams of female felines and full cream milk. There was only one way. Grab him by the scruff of the neck and fling him out.

Charlie watched me one day as I carried out this bouncing of Tiger. As the cat landed on the deck it arched its back, stood stock-still for about ten seconds while those mysterious eyes blazed cold hatred, until I really began to fear he would fly at me, to scratch, bite, and claw like a jungle wildcat. Then, stiff-legged, his tail straight up in the air, a banner of defiance, he walked—not ran—into the alleyway, the perfect picture of dumb insolence.

As the disdainful creature stalked by, I could read Charlie's thoughts. He was in two minds whether or not he should help it along the passage with his boot.

"Just like our cat at 'ome, Mac," he informed me. "So 'elp me, one of these days I'll do for 'im." Before very long he had an idea for achieving that ambition, at least in part.

We loaded up the Amazon, and by the time we left there, the ship was nearly down to the scuppers with livestock. We all bought something either furred or feathered and, homeward-bound, our accommodation was as rowdy as Regent's Park Zoo at feeding-time. There were parrots and parakeets, macaws and lovebirds, and monkeys of all ages and sizes.

Charlie the cat-hater had invested in a vicious parrot, which, before we docked in London, he hoped to have swearing like a

Billingsgate porter, with a vague idea of presenting it to his wife's sister.

"She'd 'ave 'er 'ands full learnin' 'im 'ow to talk proper," he told us in high glee, hugging himself at the thought of the acidulated, middle-aged maiden's amazement on being greeted as a "Long-lost, misbegotten son of a blankety-blank diseased sailor's so-and-so."

But as events turned out, he had to forego that pleasure for a more enjoyable one.

Slim had bought a monkey, a long-legged, long-armed comedian that kept us in stitches with its antics. It was quite tame and didn't have to be confined or fettered in any way, nor did it ever interfere with Charlie's pet.

Then one day, in strolls Tiger, as large as life, but looking a bit dashed and unwanted; he'd had too much experience of being driven away from the smaller birds. He gave the parrot a scornful glance, vaulted easily onto the settee, and was about to settle down for a nap when he and Chicko sighted each other.

Well, you never saw such a shemozzle in all your life. Yelling a simian war-cry, the monkey leapt from the rail of the top bunk, then for a solid minute, all hell broke loose.

Suspended in mid air, in the centre of the room, was a large blurred sphere, a Catherine-wheel of skin and fur, revolving at supersonic speed, accompanied by the most blood-curdling screams and chatterings, and what with the parrot squawking hysterically in the corner, the place was an absolute bedlam, a caterwauling cacophony, if ever there was one.

Then suddenly the pair made an eight-point landing, to snatch breath and re-form. One moment Tiger was there, the next he had disappeared.

You've seen a cat chased by a terrier, streaking along the ground, skittering round corners, and flying up trees at the speed of light? That was Tiger—plus. Phut! he was gone, for good, never to return; and there was his conqueror, bouncing up and down on the settee, chattering to beat the band, like a Zulu warrior doing a victory dance, and Charlie and Slim flaked out on their mattresses, laughing fit to burst.

After this incident, Charlie grew very thoughtful. He couldn't do enough for Chicko—practically took charge of him—and eventually he approached Slim with regard to the monkey's purchase.

"Look, Slim," he ventured ingratiatingly, "I'll give yer me parrot and a quid for 'im. What d'yer say?"

Slim looked at him in surprise. "What the heck do you want with a monkey, and why pick on mine?"

" Because it's the on'y thing I know of what'll scuttle a wildcat, so it's just what I want to give ours the needle."

" It'd be more than yer life's worth to take that scrapper 'ome, Charlie."

" Don't kid yerself, Slim, I'm real desperate. I swear I'll get shut of that flamin' cat if it's the last thing I do."

Old Slim has a reputation for being a skinflint and, using the excuse that he could flog it ashore for twenty pounds, he finally let Charlie have it in exchange for five pounds and his parrot. The satisfied buyer considered it would be a bargain if it accomplished all he anticipated, and, besides, he had grown fond of the amusing and affectionate animal.

When he left the ship in London on his way home, he was as happy as a sandboy, sea-bag on one shoulder, monkey on the other, a real Jack-ashore.

On rejoining the ship for the next trip, I happened to be in their cabin, sharing a bottle of brown ale with Slim, when in walks Charlie, looking pleased as Punch and twice as handsome. He slung his bag into a corner.

" Wotcher, Charlie," Slim hailed him, ravenous with curiosity. " How'd yer make out with the monkey? "

Charlie grinned all over his ugly mug. " Couldn't be better, Slim. Blimey, what a caper I've 'ad wi' that basket! "

Still wearing his face-splitting grin, he lugged out a bottle of his own and poured us out a glass apiece.

" Well, don't keep us in agony, yer lousy twirp. What 'appened? did yer scupper the cat? "

" Not exactly." Charlie chuckled mysteriously to create suspense.

" Well, what did 'appen, then? "

" I'll tell yer," says Charlie. " Yer know, yer can never tell wi' animals. When I rolled in the door wi' that fire-eater, I fully expected to see the cat shoot straight through the winder, glass an' all. What did 'appen was nothing. If they'd bin 'umans, they'd 'ave said hiya to one another, and before I'd finished me dinner, the wife and kids were in love wi' 'im, and he were sitting on the hearth-rug delousing the moggie, and she were washin' 'is face. S'fact; true as I'm sittin' 'ere drinkin' this 'orrible beer.

" It was when Lizzie—I begs 'er pardon, Elizabeth—trips in, that the ruddy balloon went up. I think it must 'ave bin 'er 'air—she'd just 'ad it dyed a coppery colour. Well, Chicko went crackers. He shinned up on the mantelpiece, then straight onto Lizzie's 'ead, grabs 'old of 'er red 'air, fists and feet full, and,

screamin' at the top of 'is voice, jumped up and down like 'e were trying to pull 'er 'ead off.

"Blimey, what a grandaddy of a barney! Lizzie were shoutin', 'Help! Murder! Police!' The kids were scared out of their senses, and the wife were screechin', 'Do something, Charlie! do something!'

"Well, what could I do? Every time I makes a grab at the monk 'e takes a piece outer me 'and, so in the finish I gets a bucket o' water and lets 'em 'ave the flippin' lot. That fixed 'em, Liz an' all; soaked the pair of 'em."

It must have been quite a rumpus, for Charlie was laughing uncontrollably at the memory.

"I'd 'ave thought yer'd 'ave been chucked out neck and crop after that little do," says Slim.

"Not a bit of it. Lizzie swore she wouldn't stay in the 'ouse with it, would pack 'er bags, and clear off, and the wife called 'er bluff. It turned out the Missus was as fed up wi' 'er as I was meself. So off Liz went the very next day and took 'er crummy cat with 'er. I tell yer, it were a smashing day's work, that."

"Well, blow me down!" says Slim. "If I'd a' known that, I'd 'ave asked ten quid for the monk."

"Aye," said Charlie, still grinning broadly. "And if *I'd* known, I'd 'ave given it yer."

★ ★ ★

MIXED BAG

Are you game to take a shot at the following questions, which cover a wide range of subjects? Crack shooting will bag you sixteen points. Please turn to page 66 to find out your score.

1. *What Hunt was up in* 1953*?* (1)
2. *Does the expression "with the skin of my teeth" occur first in: a. Shakespeare b. the Bible c. Bunyan* (1)
3. *How many legs has: a. a laughing jackass b. a Bombay duck c. a Penang lawyer* (3)
4. *What did Phiz do for Boz?* (2)
5. *Can you complete the following quotations:*
   a. The devil can—Scripture for his purpose
   b. Tomorrow to fresh—, and pastures new
   c. I'll make assurance—sure
   d. —on, Macduff (4)
6. *What is the length of an ordinary cigarette?* (1)
7. *What is the difference in meaning between the uses of the following in Great Britain and the U.S.A.: a. hundredweight b. billion c. suspenders d. F.B.I.* (4)

O Love and O Love's delight!

AUSTIN DOBSON, *Villanelle at Verona*

The air is clear;
The whole world
Glistens
In the moonlight.
We walk in the night, together,
You and I.

You sing,
And your song thrills me,
Plays upon my heartstrings,
And I sing " The Fragrant Blossoms "
In reply.

TZU YEH, " *The Fragrant Blossoms* "

Imperial Preference

The Emperor, easily recognizable, although he changed the colour of his domino from time to time during the evening walked about the room followed by the eyes of all present . . .

" I was quite agitated," says Mrs. Moulton, " when I saw his unmistakable figure approaching me. And when he began, in a high, squeaky voice (such as is adopted by masked people), to compliment me on my toilette, it was all I could do not to make a curtsy. I answered him, feeling very shy about tutoying him, as is the custom when addressing a mask.

" ' *Cela te plaît, beau masque?* '

" ' Beaucoup, belle dame. But what are you supposed to be? '

" ' I am a salamander. I can go through fire and flame without the slightest danger.'

" ' Dare you brave the fire of my eyes? '

" ' I can't see your eyes in that mask, mon gentilhomme.'

" ' Would you dare traverse the flame of my heart? '

" ' I am sure I would. If the flame is so dangerous, take care that your fine domino doesn't burn.' Such silly talk! But he seemed amused, as he probably thought that I had no idea to whom I was talking.

" Taking a red counter out of his pocket and handing it to me he said, ' Will you take supper with me? '

" ' Not alone,' I answered. ' You are too dangerous.'

" He laughed and said, ' I shall not be alone, my pretty lady.' Then giving me another counter, he said: ' This is for your husband. If you will be at two o'clock at that door '—pointing to it—' it will be opened for you.' "

EDITH SAUNDERS, *The Age of Worth*

Absent Lover

By the lake at Armenonville in the Bois de Boulogne
Small begonias had been set in the embankment, both pink and red;
With polished leaf and brittle, juicy stem;
They covered the embankment; there were wagon-loads of them,
Charming and neat, gay colours in the warm shade.

We had preferred a table near the lake, half out of view,
Well out of hearing, for a voice not raised above
A low, impassioned question and its low reply.
We both leaned forward with our elbows on the table, and you
Watched my mouth while I answered, and it made me shy.
I looked about, but the waiters knew we were in love,
And matter-of-factly left us blissfully alone.

There swam across the lake, as I looked aside, avoiding
Your eyes for a moment, there swam from under the pink and red begonias
A small creature; I thought it was a water-rat; it swam very well,
In complete silence, and making no ripples at all
Hardly; and when suddenly I turned again to you,
Aware that you were speaking, and perhaps had been speaking for some time,
I was aghast at my absence, for truly I did not know
Whether you had been asking or telling.

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY, *Armenonville*

★ *H. E. Bates lives an idyllic life in the Kentish countryside, growing flowers, taking an interest in cricket and fishing. And writing, of course. Thirty years of successful stories and novels lie behind this seemingly lazy, pleasurable existence. Young writers, take note.*

THE GOOD CORN

BY H. E. BATES

FOR twenty-five years Joe Mortimer and his wife had lived in a valley, getting a living from raising hens and geese, a few cows and calves, the fruit from half a dozen cherry trees, and an acre or two of corn.

Their small red-brick house, surrounded by coops of wire and low wooden sheds for chickens, stood close to a railway line, and occasionally passengers could look out and see, walking about the small grass paddock or across the bare autumn stubbles, a woman with wispy fair hair and long brown arms.

Sometimes she was lovingly leading a calf by a halter; sometimes she seemed to be earnestly talking to flocks of geese and hens. At times a man was with her: a tall gaunt-framed man with close-cut hair, and spare knotty muscle, and water-blue eyes that slowly lifted themselves and rested absently on the windows of passing trains.

In summer there were always many children on the trains, eagerly pressing faces to the glass as they travelled down to the sea, and whenever the Mortimers caught sight of them, there was a sudden brightness on their faces, a great eagerness, almost an illumination, as they smiled and waved their hands.

Every Tuesday and again on Saturday the Mortimers drove in a small black truck to market.

They took with them cases of eggs, unplucked brown chickens, a few chips of cherries in their season, and odd things like bunches of turnips and onions, a brace of pigeons, a hare, and daffodils carefully tied in dozens.

In the evenings, when they came home again, they counted out their money on the kitchen table. They laid it out in little piles of silver and copper and notes, counting it several times to make sure how much they had.

Then when the counting was finished, Joe Mortimer would divide the money exactly in half. Solemnly, from the very beginning of their marriage, he would put one half into a tin cash-box and then push the other across to his wife, who took it from him with long, uneager hands.

" You know what that's for," he would say. " Put that away."

At first they were quite sure about children. It seemed as natural to think of children coming as to think of eggs in the hen-runs and calves for cows and flowers on cherry trees.

It was merely a question of time before children came. Mrs. Mortimer thought of children laughing and running among flocks of hens, scattering grain, tossing it among the snapping, quarrelling brown feathers. In early spring, in cold wet weather, she sometimes nursed the first yellow chicks in warm flannel, in baskets, under the kitchen stove. That was the sort of thing children always loved, she thought.

It was in summer, when the corn was ready, that Mortimer thought of them most. In imagination he saw boys riding in harvest carts or chasing rabbits among shocks of wheat and barley. He saw himself cutting them ash-plants from hedgerows or teaching them to thresh wheat in the palms of their hands. He saw them bouncing on piles of fresh light straw on threshing-days.

Then gradually, as time went by and there were no children, he became resigned to it in a puzzled, absent sort of way. It did not embitter him. If there were no children, there were no children, he thought. That was nature; that was how it was. You could not alter that. It turned out like that with some people. There was nothing you could do about it but hope and make the best of it.

But his wife could not see it like that. It was not simply that she wanted children; it was not merely a question of pride. It was a woman's duty to have children; it was all of a woman's life to give birth. Not to bear children, when her pride was deep, was something more to a woman than misfortune. It was a failure in her living. It was like a hen that did not lay eggs, or a cow that was sterile, or a tree that never came into blossom. There was no point in the existence of them.

As time went on she drew more and more into herself. With something more than injured pride she drew deep down into an isolation where she thought of nothing but the failure that came from sterility. The reproach of failure never left her; she could not grow used to the pain of it. It was like a gnawing physical disability, an ugly mark she wanted to hide.

All the time, waiting for children, the two of them worked

very hard. They saved money. Chickens and eggs went to market every week; cherries brought good money in summer; there was always enough corn for the hens, and enough hay for the cows and calves, and plenty over.

Whenever a new calf came she cried a little. The mournful tender glassiness of a cow's big eyes after birth was something she could not bear. She liked to lift the soft wet heads of the new calves and hold them in her arms. She liked the smell of milk on their faces, and the gluey suck of their mouths if she fed them from the bucket.

After they had been married twenty-five years, she stood one morning in the small cowshed at the back of the house and watched a calf die in her arms. It was a red heifer calf, and she began to cry bitterly. The calf had been dropped in the meadow the previous afternoon, prematurely, while she and Mortimer were at market. A cold wet wind with hail in it was blowing from the west. The calf could not stand on its feet by the time she and Mortimer found it, and there was a drift of wet hail along the side of its body.

She went on to grieve about the calf. The death of the calf became a personal thing. She found she could not sleep at night. She bit the edges of the pillow so that she could lie and cry without a sound. After a time there was a continuous pain in her chest; a great bony bolt that shot across her throat and made it difficult to swallow.

At the same time she began to despise herself. "Don't come near me. I'm no good to you. You should have found someone else, not me. What have I done for you? What good have I ever been?"

"Don't say that. Don't talk like that," Mortimer said. "You're not well. You're not yourself. I'm going to get the doctor to look at you."

The doctor spent a long time with her in the bedroom, alone, sitting on the edge of the bed, asking questions. She stared at him most of the time with pallid, boring eyes.

After a time, he went downstairs, and gave Mortimer a pipe of tobacco, and walked about the yard, among the crying geese, and talked to him.

"All she can talk about is how she's been no good to me," Joe said. "How I'm not to go near her. How she hates herself. How she's been a failure all the time." The doctor did not answer; the geese cried and squawked among the barns.

"Neither one of us is sleeping well," Joe said. "I can't put up with it. I can't stand it much longer."

"Was there something that began it?"

" The calf. We lost a calf about three weeks ago. She blamed herself for that."

" Never thought of going away from here? " the doctor said.

" Away? "

" How long have you lived here? "

" Five-and-twenty years. Nearly six-and-twenty."

" I believe you might do well to move," the doctor said.

" Move? Where to? What for? "

" It might be that everything here has the same association. This is where she wanted her children and this is where she never had them. She might be happier if you moved away from here."

" She misses children. She'd have been all right with children," Joe said.

" Think it over," the doctor said. " She needs a rest too. Get her to take it a little easier. Get a girl to help in the kitchen, and with the hens. It'll be company for her. Perhaps she won't think of herself so much."

" All right. It upsets me to see her break her heart like that."

" I wish I were a farmer. If I were a farmer, you know what I'd like to do? " the doctor said. " Grow nothing but corn. That's the life. Give up practically everything but corn. With the cows and stock and birds, it's all day and every day. But with corn you go away, and you come back, and your corn's still there. It's a wonderful thing, corn. That's what I'd like to do. There's something marvellous about corn."

The following spring they moved to a farm some distance up the hill. All their married lives they had lived on flat land, with no view except the hedges of their own fields and a shining stretch of railway line. Now they found themselves with land that ran away on a gentle slope, with a view below it of an entire broad valley across which trains ran like smoking toys.

The girl who answered their advertisement for help was short and dark, with rather sleepy brown eyes, a thick bright complexion, and rosy-knuckled hands. She called at the house with her mother, who did most of what talking there was.

" She's been a bit off colour. But she's better now. She wants to work in the fresh air for a bit. You want to work in the fresh air, don't you, Elsie? "

" Yes," Elsie said.

" She's very quiet, but she'll get used to you," her mother said. " She don't say much, but she'll get used to you. She's not particular, either. You're not particular, are you, Elsie? "

" No," Elsie said.

" She's a good girl. She won't give no trouble."

" How old is she? " Mortimer said.

" Eighteen," her mother said. " Eighteen and in her nineteen. She'll be nineteen next birthday, won't you, Elsie? "

" Yes," Elsie said.

The girl settled into the house and moved about it with unobtrusive quietness. As she stood at the kitchen sink, staring down across the farmyard, the greening hedgerows of hawthorn, and the rising fields of corn, she let her big-knuckled fingers wander dreamily over the wet surface of the dishes as if she were a blind person trying to trace a pattern. Her brown eyes travelled over the fields as if she were searching for something she had lost there.

Something about this lost and dreamy attitude gradually began to puzzle Mrs. Mortimer. She saw in the staring brown eyes an expression that reminded her of the glazed eyes of a calf.

" You won't get lonely up here, will you? " she said. " I don't want you to get lonely."

" No," the girl said.

" You tell me if you get anyways lonely, won't you? "

" Yes."

" I want you to feel happy here," Mrs. Mortimer said. " I want you to feel as if you was one of our own."

As the summer went on, the presence of the girl seemed occasionally to comfort Mrs. Mortimer. Sometimes she was a little more content; she did not despise herself so much.

During daytime, at least she could look out on new fields, over new distances, and almost persuade herself that what she saw was a different sky.

But at night, in darkness, the gnaw of self-reproaches remained. She could not prevent the old cry from breaking out: " Don't come near me. Not yet. Soon perhaps—but not yet. Not until I feel better about things. I will one day, but not yet."

Once or twice she even cried, " You could get someone else. I wouldn't mind. I honestly wouldn't mind It's hard for you. I know it is. I wouldn't mind."

Sometimes Mortimer, distracted too, got up and walked about the yard in summer darkness, smoking hard, staring at the summer stars.

All summer, in the afternoons, after she had worked in the house all morning, the girl helped about the yard and the fields. By July, the corn was level as a mat of thick blue-green pile between hedgerows of wild rose and blackberry flower. In the garden in front of the house, bushes of currant were bright with berries that glistened like scarlet pearls from under old lace curtains

The thick fingers of the girl were stained red with the juice of currants as she gathered them. Her finger-marks were bright smears across the heavy front of her cotton pinafore.

As the two women knelt among the bushes, in alleyways of ripe fruit, lifting the bleached creamy curtains in the July sun, Mrs. Mortimer said, " I'm glad of another pair of hands. I don't know what I should have done without another pair of hands. Your mother will miss you back home, I reckon."

" She's got six more to help," the girl said. " She don't need me all that much."

" Six? Not children? "

" When I was home there was seven. Eight before the baby went."

" Before the baby went? Whose baby? What happened to the baby? "

" It was mine. I gave it away," the girl said. " I didn't know what to do with it no sense, so I gave it away. My sister adopted it. They all said it was best like that. I gave it to my married sister."

" Gave it away? " Mrs. Mortimer sat on the earth, between the bushes, feeling sick. " Gave it away? A baby? You gave it away? "

" Yes," Elsie said. " It's no bother to me now."

Towards the end of the month the first corn began to ripen. The sheen of olive on the wheat began to turn pale yellow, then to the colour of fresh-baked crust on bread.

As he looked at it Mortimer remembered what the doctor had said. " You go away, and you come back, and your corn's still there. It's a wonderful thing, corn. There's something marvellous about corn."

Now, as he looked at it, he could not help feeling proud of the corn. It helped him, too, as he thought of his wife. It hurt him to hear her cry that he must keep away from her, that the pride in her was still tortured, the love in her not smoothed out. The corn helped to soothe him a little. The wind that ran darkly across it on cloudy days had a beautiful twist, as if long snakes were slipping among the ears.

In the evenings after supper, while the two women washed the dishes, he was often alone with the corn. And one evening, as he stood watching it, he did something he had always liked to do. He broke off an ear and began to thresh it in his hands, breaking the husk from the grain with the pressure of the balls of his thumbs.

While he was still doing this, the girl came down the hillside

from the house with a message that a man had called to deliver a sail-cloth. Mortimer blew on the grain that lay in his cupped hands, scattering a dancing cloud of chaff like summer flies.

" I'll be up in a minute," he said. " Here—tell me what you think of that."

" The wheat? " she said.

She picked a few grains of wheat from the palm of his hand. She did not toss them into her mouth but put them in one by one, with the tips of her fingers, biting them with the front of her teeth. Her teeth were surprisingly level and white, and he could see the whiteness of the new grains on her tongue as she bit them.

" They're milky," she said.

" Still want a few more days, I think," he said.

As they walked back up the field she plucked an ear of wheat herself and began to thresh it with her hands. The corn, almost as high as the girl herself, rustled in her fingers. When she bent down to blow on the husks, a small gust of wind suddenly turned and blew the chaff up into her face.

She laughed rather loudly, showing her teeth again, and he said, " Here, you want to do it like this. You want to bring your thumbs over so that you can blow down there, and make a chimney."

" How? " she said.

A moment later he was holding her hands. He stood slightly behind her and held her hands, and showed her how to cup them so that the chaff could blow out through the chimney made by her fingers.

" Now blow," he said.

" I can't blow for laughing."

Her mouth spluttered and a new gust of laughter blew into her hands and a dancing cloud of chaff leapt up in a spurt from her fingers. She laughed again, and he felt her body shaking.

A few husks of wheat blew into her mouth and a few more stuck to the moist edges of her lips as she laughed.

She pulled out her handkerchief to wipe her lips, still laughing, and suddenly he found himself trying to help her, and then in a clumsy way trying to kiss her face and mouth at the same time.

" Elsie," he said. " Here, Elsie—"

She laughed again, and said, " We don't want to fool here. Somebody will see us if we start fooling here. Mrs. Mortimer will see us. Not here."

" You were always so quiet," he said.

" It isn't always the loud ones who say most, is it? " she said. She began to shake herself. " Now I've got chaff down my neck. Look at me."

She laughed again and shook herself, twisting her body in a way that suddenly reminded him of the twist of dark air running among the ripening corn.

He tried to kiss her again and she said, "Not here, I keep telling you. Some time, if you like, but not here. Not in broad daylight. I don't like people watching me."

"All right—"

"Some other time. It's so public here," she said. "There'll be another time."

By the end of August, the corn was cut and carted. The stubbles were empty except for the girl and Mrs. Mortimer, gleaning on fine afternoons, and a few brown hens scratching among the straw.

"I could never quite give up the hens," Mrs. Mortimer said. "It would be an awful wrench to give them up. I didn't mind the cherries, and I didn't even mind the calves so much. But the hens are company. I can talk to the hens."

About the house, in the yard, bright yellow stacks stood ready for threshing, and there was a fresh clean smell of straw on the air. During summer the face of the girl had reddened with sun and air, and as autumn came on it seemed to broaden and flatten, the thick skin ripe and healthy in texture.

"Soon be winter coming on, Elsie," Mrs. Mortimer said. "You think you'll stay up here with us for the winter?"

"Well, I expect I shall if nothing happens," Elsie said.

"Happens? If what happens?"

"Well, you never know what may happen," Elsie said, "do you?"

"I want you to stay if you can," Mrs. Mortimer said. "They get a lot of snow up here some winters, but perhaps we'll be lucky. Stay if you can. I got now so as I think of you as one of our own."

In a growing fondness for the girl Mrs. Mortimer occasionally remembered and reflected on the incident of the baby. It was very strange and inexplicable to her, the incident of the baby. It filled her with mystery and wonder. It was a mystery beyond comprehension that a girl could conceive and bear a child and then, having delivered it, give it away. She felt she would never be able to grasp the reasons for that. "You'd think it would be like tearing your own heart out to do a thing like that," she thought.

Towards the end of November the first snow fell, covering the hillsides down to within a hundred feet of the valley. The house stood almost on the dividing line of snow, like a boat at

the edge of a tide, between fields that were still fresh green with winter corn, and others smooth with the first thin white fall.

"I got something to tell you," the girl said to Mrs. Mortimer. "I don't think I'll be staying here much longer."

"Not staying?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't think I will, that's all."

"Is it the snow? You don't like the snow, do you? That's what it is, the snow."

"It's not the snow so much."

"Is it us then?" Mrs. Mortimer said. "Don't you like us no more?"

"I like you. It isn't that," the girl said.

"What is it then, Elsie? Don't say you'll go. What is it?"

"It's the baby," Elsie said.

"The baby?" Mrs. Mortimer felt a pain of tears in her eyes. "I somehow thought one day you'd want it back. I'm glad."

"Not that baby," the girl said. "Not that one. I'm going to have another."

Mrs. Mortimer felt a strange sense of disturbance. She was shaken over again by disbelief and pain. She could not speak, and the girl said, "In the spring. April, I think it'll be."

"How did you come to do that?" Mrs. Mortimer said. "Up here? With us?"

"I know somebody," the girl said. "I got to know somebody. That's all."

"I don't understand," Mrs. Mortimer said. She spoke quietly, almost to herself. She thought, with the old pain, of her years of sterility. She remembered how, in distraction, she had so much despised herself, how she had turned, out of pride, into isolation, away from Joe. "I don't understand," she said.

At night, she turned restlessly in her bed. Splinters of moonlight between the edges of the curtains cut across her eyes and kept them stiffly open.

"Can't you sleep again?" Joe said.

"It's the girl," she said. "Elsie. I can't get her out of my mind."

"What's wrong with Elsie?"

"She's having another baby," she said. "In the spring."

"Oh no!" he said. "Oh no! no! You don't mean that? No."

"It seems she got to know somebody. Somehow," she said. She felt across her eyes the hard stab of moonlight. She turned and put her hand out and touched Joe on the shoulder.

" Joe," she said, " that doesn't seem right, does it? It doesn't seem fair."

Joe did not answer.

" It doesn't seem fair. It's not right. It seems cruel," she said.

The following night she could not sleep again. She heard a westerly wind from across the valley beating light squalls of rain on the windows of the bedroom. The air was mild in a sudden change, and she lay with her arms outside the coverlet, listening to the rain washing away the snow.

Suddenly Joe took hold of her hands and began crying into them. " I didn't know what I was doing. She kept asking me. It was her who kept asking me."

She could not speak and he turned his face to the pillow. " I didn't think you wanted me. You used to say so. I got so as I thought you didn't want me any more. You used to say—"

" I want you," she said. " Don't be afraid of that."

" Did she say anything? " he said. " Did she say it was me? "

" No. She didn't say."

" Did you think it was me? "

" I'd begun to think," she said. " I thought I could tell by the way you couldn't look at her."

She heard him draw his breath in dry snatches, unable to find words. Suddenly she was sorry for him, with no anger or reproach or bitterness, and she stretched out her long bare arms.

" Come here to me," she said. " Come close to me. I'm sorry. It was me. It was my fault."

" Never," he said. " Never. I won't have that."

" Listen to me," she said. " Listen to what I say."

As she spoke she was aware of a feeling of being uplifted, of a depressive weight being taken from her . . .

" Listen, Joe, if I ask her perhaps she'll give it to us. You remember? She gave the other away."

" No," he said. " You couldn't have that—"

" I could," she said. She began smiling to herself in the darkness. " Tomorrow I'll ask her. We could do it properly—make it legal—so that it was ours."

" If you forgive me," Joe said. " Only if you do that."

" I forgive you," she said.

She went through the rest of the winter as if she were carrying the baby herself. " You mustn't do that, Elsie. Don't lift that," she would say. " Take and lie down for an hour. Rest yourself—it'll do you the world of good to rest."

She looked forward to April with a strange acute sensation of being poised on a wire, frightened that she would fall before she got there.

When the baby was born, she wrapped it in a warm blanket and succoured it like the early chickens she had once wrapped in flannel, in a basket, under the stove.

"And I can have him?" she said. "You haven't changed your mind? You won't change your mind, will you?"

"No," the girl said. "You can have him. I don't want the bother. You can look after him."

"We'll love him," she said. "We'll look after him."

On a day in late April she took the baby and carried him down through the yard, in the sunshine, to where the fields began. Hedgerows were breaking everywhere into bright new leaf. Primroses lay in thick pale drifts under the shelter of them and under clumps of ash and hornbeam. In every turn of wind there was a whitening of anemones, with cowslips trembling gold about the pasture.

She lifted the baby up, in the sunshine, against the blue spring sky, and laughed and shook him gently, showing him the world of leaf and flower and corn.

"Look at all the flowers!" she said. "Look at the corn! The corn looks good, doesn't it? It's going to be good this year, isn't it? Look at it all! Isn't the corn beautiful?"

High above her, on the hill, there was a sound of endless lark song, and in the fields the young curved lines of corn were wonderfully fresh and trembling in the sun.

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SIX LEGS ARE WELCOME

BY GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

IT'S no good waving at them. Take this one, for example! She'll get bored with crawling up my arm in a moment, and fly off. For twenty-seven days in the month there's just the usual mixture of insects, and on the twenty-eighth, for no reason at all, one species gets completely out of hand and fills up all the available air.

No, I don't know what these are called—apart from their Indian name. Odd-looking creatures, aren't they? Six legs. Red and black Asdic. And about an inch and a half of torpedo tube in the stern. That's only a flying ant in your gin. Just pick it out. There you are—neither of you one penny the worse!

We'll go inside in another half-hour when the mosquitoes come on duty. But you needn't pay any attention at all to these fellows. They're just satisfying their curiosity, with only one day to do it in perhaps. Well, yes, there are limits. I quite agree. I don't hold with those Buddhist chaps who won't squash a cockroach in case it turns out to be their defunct mother-in-law. I've no fellow-feeling for any of the little pests.

But if it hadn't been for them I should be halfway through a life sentence now instead of farming this wonderful place. A man can never quite forget a bit of luck like that. It's bound to influence him. Let me get you another glass. That one's drowned herself. Weak heart, probably. Live and let live—that's all I say. This bit of Paraguay belongs to them quite as much as to me. I'd better tell you the story. I haven't listened to myself speaking my own language for more than a year. And it will stop you imagining that something is crawling down the back of your neck, when all you need—like the rest of us—is a haircut.

I was a mechanic in Argentina then—repairing tractors and managing the power-plant and refrigeration on a big *estancia* up in the north-east corner of Corrientes. That's a strip of real white man's country—in between the marshes of the Paraná and the forests of Misiones. I liked the life and the people. Took to it from the start, like so many other Englishmen.

The nearest town was Posadas, where the train ferry crosses the Paraná from Paraguay to Argentina. I used to go there three or four times a year to keep an eye on the discharge of any of our machinery from the river steamers, and arrange for its transport up country. You could drive a truck from Posadas to the *estancia* —just—but it was more comfortable to ride.

Posadas was not much of a town. A lot of dim lights, but no bright ones except the railway coaches and the Estrella de la Banda.

The Estrella was a far better joint than you would have expected to find in a little river port—not at all the usual *pulperia* with a couple of half-witted girls in a dusty corner and drunks sleeping it off outside the door.

Posadas had a small floating population of travellers between Paraguay and Argentina—some of them men of distinction or money, or even both—and Don Luis, who owned the Estrella, found it worth his while to feed them decently and provide entertainment. There were plenty of first-class passengers who made a point of staying the night, whenever they had to cross the Paraná, just in order to visit Don Luis's joint.

He was a big buck of an Italian—padded shoulders, local politics, and all—but he was born in the *pampa* and he flattered himself that he was an Argentine of the Argentines. Anyone who addressed him as Luigi instead of Luis was safer the other side of the river. I knew him well enough to dislike him thoroughly. He didn't suspect it. You can go on detesting a man for years in Spanish so long as you have good manners. That's quite impossible in English.

There was a north wind blowing on that last visit of mine to Posadas. Just like today. It always brings the damp heat and the insects. And thirst.

The boat from Buenos Aires had not arrived; so, instead of the drinks with the captain which I had been looking forward to, I went into the Estrella de la Banda. You could trust Luis's whisky. I'll say that for him.

It was early, and the place hadn't got going. Luis had a new girl.

"That's a little beauty!" I said to him.

She wasn't my sort, he told me. She was meant for travelling senators and so forth.

"She's only a *mestiza*," I said. "What's so special about her?"

He whispered to me what was special about her. I didn't believe him. But one of those senators off the international train might possibly want to believe him.

I sat down beside her. She wasn't more than seventeen, and she was wearing a frock of innocent respectability just like any

young girl at her first party—except that it was black. She had the wide, gentle face of the Indian, with eyes far apart and hair growing low on the forehead; but her mouth and her nose and all the rest of her were Spanish of the loveliest.

I couldn't get much out of her but "*sí, señor*," and "*no, señor*." Very haughty indeed. Full of conventional little parlour tricks. She wouldn't touch anything but lemonade. The line would have gone over very well in Buenos Aires, but I thought she was overdoing it for Posadas where we all liked a bit of slap-and-tickle with, say, the third round of drinks.

I spent an hour with her and then cleared out. I told Don Luis he was right—that she wasn't at all the sort for a hardworking man.

All the same I could not get her out of my mind. Her face was so selfless and serious, too comfortable for a place like the Estrella de la Banda. Not that there aren't some perfect beauties about in cabarets, as well as in shops and offices.

But her type was different. I've often thought about it since, and I can't put it better than this. You didn't feel she was bothering about being loved. She wanted to love.

Her name was Rosalinda Torres. But I couldn't guess much from that. Rosalinda sounded professional. On the other hand they do like, out here in the backwoods, to give their daughters high-sounding names.

There was no steamer next day, so I had nothing to do but hang around in the heat and slap at all the life coming down on the north wind, just like you chaps who travel for pleasure. By the evening my curiosity was greater than ever. I call it curiosity. But I thought I would be quite ready to take it to another table if young Rosalinda showed no interest in it.

She was sitting with the Captain of the Port, whom I did not like to interrupt, for the sake of favours to come. However, he wasn't a wealthy man—in spite of all the help we shippers used to give him for the sake of his dear wife and children—and he soon got the same impression as I had the previous night. Meanwhile I was surprised to find myself a bit short with the other girls who wanted to share my whisky.

I had the sense to play up to Rosalinda's act. So, instead of beckoning or sending the waiter for her, I went over hat in hand. She gave me a reasonably courteous little nod, and indicated that I might sit down.

We got on a little better until I told her that I was English. That closed her up tight. I gathered that foreigners were right out of her experience—as terrifying as a jaguar until you are sure it isn't hungry.

But I kept on treating her as if she had just been let out of the convent school for a day with uncle. I must have convinced her in the end that I, at any rate, wasn't hungry.

Suddenly she burst out: "I do not understand this place!"

"What's wrong with it?" I asked. "It's as good a place as there is till you get down to the Plata."

"It's not this way that a girl gets married," she answered.

One doesn't like to be fooled. I've knocked around the cabarets of two continents, and I expect you have, too. You never know what tricks those girls will be up to. I told myself firmly that I was not rich enough to be a senator, and was too old to be sentimental.

"When did *you* leave the convent?" I asked, not making the irony too obvious.

"In May," she said.

It was a plain fact that she was stating.

"And your parents?"

Then it all came out—so far as she herself was capable of understanding what had happened to her. She had never come to grips with everyday life at all, you see. The forest, her parents, her simple education—that was all her past.

She was Paraguayan. Her parents, both of them, were of mixed Spanish and Indian blood. Humble folk, but true Americans and proud of it. They had managed to make a good living—and a little cash over—out of a remote holding up the river. No near neighbours but the forest Indians. As a matter of fact, their original farm was a part of this one. And it was a lot harder for them to reach by paddling than for you in your motor launch.

When Rosalinda came home from the convent at Asunción, she found that the land was going back to scrub, that the few peons had left, and that both her parents had been dead for over a month. Her brother, Hilario, was away in the Chaco, where the post was not nearly so reliable as word of mouth passed from settlement to settlement.

So there she was. Relations, none. Money, none. Food, what there was on the place. And then some fool, wanting to get her a free passage—but as likely as not he had no money, either—put her on Don Luis's launch as a first step towards returning her to civilization.

Luis was on his way down the Paraná from Brazil, and he had some woman with him—I never found out who it was—that he passed off as his wife. Both of them, she insisted, were angels to her. And when Luis suggested that, if she stopped off at Posadas, he would find her a husband, she believed him.

Can you imagine such simplicity? He would find her a husband, just like that. Well, after the war I gave up the sea—and me with my Chief's ticket and a good job—because a Brazilian told me that he only needed a young partner, with lots of energy and a knowledge of machinery, to develop his diamond mine. What's the difference?

Don Luis cannot have expected that she would tell me so much. Or perhaps he didn't mind. Argentines never quite understand the Paraguayans, who are nearly all of mixed blood, whatever class they belong to. He may have been looking at the girl the wrong way up.

Put it this way: he had picked up a destitute Indian girl with a little white blood; if he placed her well, it would be considered —by his friends and customers—a lot kinder than letting her starve in the forest.

But call her an ordinary Paraguayan girl, decently educated by poor parents who chose to live at the back of beyond, and the thing was an outrage on humanity.

I did not know what to say to her. I could not tell her on so short an acquaintance to jump on a horse and come to me if the going got really rough. She was far too lost to understand whom she could trust.

And, anyway, it was a delicate subject to approach. I felt she was so blooming innocent that she might not know what she was in for. Of course she knew. Any woman would. But I was dripping with sentiment.

What I was really afraid of was her submissiveness. She was so used to doing what her parents told her and then what the nuns told her that she went and did what Don Luis told her. She had not grown up at all. If she stayed at the Estrella de la Banda for long, Indian resignation was going to overcome Spanish pride. That, no doubt, was what Luis reckoned.

" Do you want to go back to the convent? " I asked her.

" Not much," she said, giving me her first smile

" What can you do to earn a living? "

" Cook," she answered, " and sew and look after a house."

Well, that was that. Like so many old-fashioned girls, she could spend the rest of her life as somebody's servant if she hadn't any money, or as somebody's wife if she had.

" Where are you living? "

" In a little house that Don Luis has lent me. There is a woman to look after me."

A real professional he was. The only mistake he made was to exhibit her in the Estrella. If he hadn't, she would never have seen that there was anything wrong at all. I doubted if I could

even get any help from the parish priest. He wasn't a man of the world, and would hesitate to believe the libellous accusations of a red-hot heretic when Don Luis subscribed heavily to the Church, and had provided the little waif with chaperon and all. As for the police, they would take the same point of view for less charitable reasons.

I had no intelligent suggestion to make—except that she should stick to lemonade—so I just sat with her till the place closed down, limiting my whisky to one every half-hour and playing baby games with pencil and paper.

Don Luis did not object. From time to time he would give me a grin and shake his head at me across the room. There was none of his high-class custom about.

The next afternoon the steamer arrived. By the time I had collected the electric pump I was waiting for and stowed it safely on a truck and had a meal, it was late and the Estrella was full. Besides the regulars there were a young Argentine off the train—very much the moneyed *señorito*—and a mixed bunch of passengers from the boat.

Don Luis had already fixed up Rosalinda with the likely young Argentine. She didn't know the conventions of the place, and she left her escort with a polite little bow and came straight over to my table. He stared murder, half rose, and thought better of it. I was a much bigger man, wearing my working-clothes with the flies buzzing round the sweat stains. He couldn't quite guess what he was up against. Mark you, I've said the Estrella was a high-class joint, and so it was compared to the other places of so-called amusement along the Paraná; but to well-dressed young gentlemen, fresh from Buenos Aires, we probably looked a lot of customers who would stand no nonsense.

I was getting along splendidly with Rosalinda. Bless her heart, she had forgotten her troubles enough to be flirtatious! Just a matter of eyes, of course. Nothing that she wouldn't have done in her own home with proud mother looking on benevolently. And then she suddenly jumped up and cried, " Hilario! "

We were sitting at a little table at the unfashionable end of the Estrella, near the angle of the bar and wall. Hilario's eyes must have been burning into us while he first watched from the entrance, and then walked the length of the room. It was the end of a long, desperate journey to his sister, during every hour of which he had imagined himself arriving too late.

He did not kiss her or throw his arms round her. He was the kind of stern brother you read about in the Old Testament. I was his first objective. He said to me, " Outside! "

Rosalinda evidently thought this was the proper way for a brother to behave. She made no attempt to touch him until she had loosed off some quick explanations in Guaraní. They had been brought up together in the lonelinesss of the forest, those two, and words were hardly necessary to them at all. A half-sentence, an exclamation, a tone of voice could tell far more essentials than the usual forms of speech that you and I go through.

Hilario begged me to forgive him, and if I could not see my way to forget an unjust insult, to wait for him a little while until he had obliged the gentleman responsible for his agitation.

He was only about eighteen and looked extraordinarily like his sister—the same gentle, tender face with the features a little sharper and the mouth a little thinner. He was wearing the old-fashioned hat and poncho which you might see in Posadas on a *fiesta*. On working days, however, we wore coats and trousers like anyone else, with a few individualities in the way of boots and belts. Hilario and his manners belonged to the Latin-America of the last century.

" Which is this Don Luis of whom I have heard? " he asked me. He felt it indelicate even to mention the name to his sister.

Luis had just come in from the kitchen—about the only place where his personal influence never did anything but good—and was standing near the other end of the bar, staring at the new arrival.

He must have guessed who Hilario was—the resemblance to Rosalinda was so marked—but probably reckoned that a half-Indian boy, with a face made for women and the guitar, was not likely to give him much trouble.

They met in the upper half of the dance floor, and Hilario called him exactly what he was. Luis's knife was out before the second syllable.

I don't know whether you have ever seen our up-country fighting. *Srrr! Click! Sssh!* And it's all over.

One moment Luis was as fast as a hornet's sting, and the next moment he was lying on the floor with his works coiling out around him and the flies beginning to come in from the kitchen. He had courage. He didn't complain. That sort of thing was an occupational risk, I suppose.

Hilario's face was still soft and courteous. He might have been apologizing to the company for some outrageous favour which he had felt bound to extend to Don Luis. He had cut upwards and his hand had followed the knife. The blood was running down from his fist to the blade and dripping on the floor. You could hear it.

That flash of red and silver under the hard white light hypnotized everyone into silence for a second or two. Rosalinda was already behind her brother—though I don't quite know how she got there. It was the only safe place in the whole world for her. She knew that instinctively.

No one—except Rosalinda—had moved yet, but Hilario had not a hope of reaching the front door. He backed towards the kitchen entrance alongside the bar. Out to his right flank the barman reached for a gun.

We didn't normally use such things in Posadas. It was the bar revolver—kept under the counter for emergencies alongside the lemons and the dishwater. I don't believe in getting mixed up in foreign rows like a drunken tourist.

Still, what was I to do? Hilario was the only chap who could produce a satisfactory solution for Rosalinda.

The barman was half turned away from me, and the soda-water siphon took him over the right ear. It was far too forcible a way of expressing my sympathies with a murderer's sister, but I had nothing else handy. Disastrous! I tell you, I knew while that siphon was still in the air that the only future for me in Argentina was a long gaol sentence.

That broke the spell. A woman screeched. The room rose at us. The customers might have shrugged their shoulders and attended to their business, such as it was, if this affair had merely been a difference of opinion between two of them about an Estrella girl. But Don Luis was a prominent citizen, and he had been so very thoroughly killed.

If I'd had half a chance I would have slipped through the kitchen door and bolted. But Hilario and Rosalinda were blocking it. I caught a glimpse of the cook—he was a Syrian and a sensible man—sailing out through the window, and then I found myself cast for the part of Horatius on the Bridge while Hilario shoved Rosalinda out at the back and told her to run.

I wasn't alone long enough for any heroism. I remember smashing a bottle on somebody, and getting in a right hook which hurt me quite as much as the other fellow. Then a chair broke on my head. I suppose the leg was rotten. Fortunately for me, Don Luis had never succeeded in keeping termites out of the furniture. I went down and, for an instant, out. The next thing I knew was Hilario dragging me out of the kitchen into the open.

That appalling knife of his seemed a bit wetter round the point, and he had managed to slam and lock the door behind us. The pursuit—this was all a matter of seconds—had not yet had time to disengage and run round the block to the back of the Estrella.

There were only some shanties and a lane between us and the river bank; as soon as we were clear of them and had collected Rosalinda, I was running rather than staggering.

After paddling himself across the Paraná, Hilario had left his canoe about two miles downstream. He hadn't stopped to think. Indeed, he hadn't thought at all during his journey on foot and horse and rail and river right across the length of Paraguay; he was just a moving blaze of anger.

Posadas police hardly entered into his calculations at all. They preferred to spend their nights in decent gentlemanly idleness – but once their attention had been drawn to any undesirable character trying to escape from Argentina to Paraguay, stopping him was a routine job. They knew the river bank so thoroughly that they could count on picking us up and returning to their bottles before wives or waiters had time to clear away.

The night was dark; but one can see by starlight in these parts and spot a moving figure at twenty-five yards so long as it does move. There was no cover at all along the flood plain of the Paraná.

Worse still, there were creeks and patches of marsh so that we could never race off into the Americas at large or even get very far from the tracks. To my mind our chance of reaching Hilario's canoe was nil.

We just bolted along the river bank until we were stopped by a creek. We had to follow it up to its head, and that lost us our lead. Once round the creek, we had a choice of three tracks westwards—one north of a marsh and one south, and a third which ran down to the sands. We heard horses already cantering out from Posadas, and there was no time at all for hesitation.

We took the middle track, north of the marsh. The going was good, and Rosalinda didn't hold us back. She wasn't even shocked by all this savagery. Murder didn't count when it was right. Just another example of her extraordinary innocence.

She had kicked off her shoes and was running as free as a little twelve-year-old. Her education had not lasted long enough to soften the soles of her feet.

But it was the shoes that gave us away. The police troopers spotted them, lying bang in the middle of the right track. They did not have to split up and do a bit of scouting. They came on behind us like a charge of cavalry.

There was a small patch of open plain by the side of the track, and we dropped flat on it. When the pursuit—all six of them – had thundered past, I began to have hopes of getting clear. The obvious move was to double back to the head of the creek and try one of the other two routes. We had just reached the junction

when back came the police. They must have reached some point —a customs post, I think—beyond which we could not have passed. Three of them were riding south of the marsh, and three north—at the same time quartering the narrow strip of plain where we had lain down and covering the third track to the sands.

In the direction of Posadas were more lights, carried by such of the sporting citizenry as were attracted by the chance of a free shot at human game. No hope for us there, either—so we cut down into the angle between the creek and the Paraná where our first dash from the town had landed us.

The whole of the hunt gradually converged upon our corner. I thought this was an unfortunate accident until a launch drifted down from Posadas and began to search the water's edge with its light to prevent us swimming away. The police knew exactly where we were. Long experience, and elimination of all the possibilities.

"Why do they not bring nets?" Hilario whispered bitterly. He was hurt at being treated as something only fit for the taxidermist. After all, he knew that he was a harmless and honourable boy on all occasions when convention did not call for murder.

The advancing line, with one flank on the Paraná and the other on the creek, became shorter as it approached us. There was not a hope of breaking through.

To judge by the lights, the gap between man and man was about forty yards and rapidly lessening. It was then that I began to see stars, and ascribed them to the crack I had received over the skull.

It's not what a man really feels that finishes him, but what he thinks he feels. Just because there was a sickening, patternless mess of lights in front of my eyes, I was ready to pass out. I told Rosalinda and Hilario to slip through the line if they saw the remotest chance, and leave me.

They were whispering excitedly in Guaraní, and seemed unreasonably hopeful.

"But why? Why give up now?" Rosalinda asked me.

There was a sob of disappointment in her voice, just as if I had refused her something which she had set her heart on, when all the rest of her world had agreed.

I tried to pull myself together, and noticed that some of the lights, instead of dancing in front of my eyes, were stationary in Rosalinda's hair.

Then I understood. There had been a batch of fireflies on the river flats. The muggy weather and the hot north wind had brought on the one day in twenty-eight that I was telling you about. They might have been ants or flies or these savage-looking

fellows which you seem to have forgotten about for the moment; but they happened to be beetles—fireflies.

Beautiful? I don't know whether it was or not. It was mad. I tell you that there wasn't a cubic foot of air—literally—without a firefly in it. You couldn't see. No wonder I thought I was fainting.

It was like—well, I've often tried to describe it to myself. Imagine yourself infinitely small and suspended in a cylinder of gas. Imagine the hot molecules rushing about and cannoning into each other. No, it wasn't beautiful.

The three troopers on the left of the line had been following the bank of the creek. They were now so close that we didn't dare whisper. Not that they would have heard us. They were cursing and damning and waving their hats about.

Quite useless, but it's a human instinct to try and clear a space in front of the eyes.

Their horses were nervous and giving any amount of trouble. I doubt if they were in the least bothered by the fireflies; they had caught the exasperation of their riders, as horses always do.

Hilario started to squirm forward foot by foot, and Rosalinda and I followed. You couldn't tell where the police troopers were going, fighting their horses in that damned silly way instead of showing confidence.

One of the poor beasts was just about to tread on me when it saw me.

It shied, and its rider's language was worse than ever. He didn't look at the ground. He was trying to pierce the intolerable flickering on a level with his eyes.

It was perfectly safe to stand up and run as soon as we were past them.

At the head of the creek we took the track down to the sands, and reached Hilario's canoe by swimming and wading.

Of course, I can never go back to Argentina, but who cares? Three thousand acres I farm here. When Hilario showed me this place and its own private river with a flow of 300,000 gallons a minute and an even drop of twenty feet in half a mile, I saw what could be done in the way of power-plant and refrigeration.

It wouldn't suit everyone. But we often have visitors like yourself. And they are very welcome whether they have two legs or six. Hilario himself always preferred mining to farming. He's done very well at it.

Rosalinda? Well, they get a bit full in the figure, you know. But does that matter when the only face you ever want to look at is on top of it?

Our boys made her go out fishing this afternoon. They'll be back any moment; certainly before the mosquitoes start. Well, yes, if you look at it that way, I suppose they have started. But don't go slapping at them. Round here nobody has ever died of fever since her poor mother and father.

★ ***Geoffrey Household has sold bananas in Spain and printing inks in South America. During the war he did cloak-and-dagger work on secret missions in the Transylvanian mountains (where he met and fell in love with the attractive Hungarian girl who was to become his wife). Later he travelled in Palestine and Syria. No wonder the escapades of his heroes carry such conviction—his own life has held enough romance and intrigue to provide plots for years to come. He is the living contradiction of the theory that the rolling stone gathers no moss. Among his best-known fictional moss readers will remember "Rogue Male," and "Rough Shoot." Placidly settled now with a family of three children, Household cultivates a riverside garden in Chiswick.***

★ ★ ★

RIVER MUSIC

Water tumbling from the dam,
Green and grey and flecked with white,
So the river rushes on
Through the day and through the night.

From the hills springs its source,
Trickling gently at its birth,
Growing larger down the slopes
Gurgling louder in its mirth.

Through the fields it surges on
Getting bigger day by day
Passing towns and under bridges,
So the river wends its way.

Past the dam it hurtles on,
Sometimes slow and sometimes fast,
Never pausing on its way
Till it joins the sea at last.

FLEUR MOUNTAIN

DUEL

BY BRIAN CLEEVE

SHE wasn't the girl to be in a small place at all. There was too much swagger about her entirely; red hair like chestnut leaves falling in the autumn, and so long and thick that a man could have filled his two hands with it and felt it spilling over his wrists like warm silk. And her face, white and sullen, with just the tinge of her blood colouring the skin. Dark eyes and full lips, and her body supple as a whip. Almost like a boy's body, with long, straight legs and fine shoulders. And yet you knew it was a woman's body the second that you put your arms round her, the way I did one night coming back from a dance in the next village.

There was a whole crowd of us; Padraic, and Michael who'd been in England, and my cousin Sean and I, and a few more; and, of course, the girls, all in a bunch at first, carrying their dance slippers and giggling together. But not Fran. Not Francesca.

You see, even her name was wrong. Maire, or Sheila, or Mary Ann, or Siobhan—it could have been almost anything, and at least it wouldn't have made things worse for her. But Francesca. Even if she hadn't looked as she did, a name like that would have done her no good.

It had a foreign sound about it that made a man shy of saying it. And to make it worse, she got mad if you called her Fran. Francesca, it had to be, or nothing, and so, for most of the men in the village, it was nothing.

You see, we were a big enough village for the men to pick and choose. Not a town, but maybe a thousand inhabitants, or very near it; a couple of hundred houses and a dozen or so small shops caught in a fold of the mountains. And most of the best-looking men left before they were old enough to get serious about a girl.

They went to England, or Australia, or America, or just to Dublin, and sometimes they came back for a week or two, and sometimes they didn't come back at all. Which meant that unless a girl followed them she was hard put to it to find a husband.

And so Fran, who would have been a princess in a big city, with a dozen men at her feet, hadn't a man at all in Ballysaggart, except me, and she didn't like me very much.

I wasn't really her style of man, and I knew it, and she knew it, and when we were together because she had no one else to be with, she'd take it out on me. I was hardly taller than she was, and I had thin wrists, and a bit of a limp where the bone hadn't set properly after I'd broken my leg one time as a child, and when the others were playing hurley I'd be left watching, or minding the goal.

Jamie the Book, they called me, because I was always reading, and about the only real friend I had in the place was the schoolmaster. From the time we were small I was the odd one out among the boys, and she was the odd one out with the girls. That threw us together, but it never made her like me, and as I've said, she used to take it out on me.

Like that night coming home from the dance. She let me dance with her, when she hadn't anyone else, and she let me walk home with her, rather than have the other girls see that she had no one to walk with her, but she didn't talk to me. She just walked beside me, carrying her dance shoes, her face white and sullen in the moonlight.

I could feel the warmth of her, and sometimes her arm would brush against mine by accident. There was a faint scent from her dress, and her hair was like a dark shadow swinging at her shoulders.

I wanted to say something to her, tell her how beautiful she was, but I was afraid. I knew how she'd turn to me, her eyes grey-green and cold as the sea, her mouth contemptuous, and she wouldn't need to answer me. And I'd just blush and stammer, as I had a dozen and two dozen times before.

That was the kind of thing that drove the other boys away from her. The sureness of her, the bold swing of her when she walked, and the way she'd look a man straight in the face. They may like that kind of thing in the cinema in Ireland, but they don't like it in a wife. It's the girl with the little, meek voice and a couple of hundred pounds put by from her wages that they're looking for.

A girl like Fran only frightens them, when she doesn't annoy them.

She frightened me too, though in a different way, and so I just walked beside her, while the others strung out behind us, pairing off two and two and stopping now and then for a bit of a court in the shadow thrown by a tree, or when the moon hid herself behind a cloud.

But we just walked. And I thought about the evening and the three or four dances I'd had with Fran until the stranger cut in on us.

I knew most of the men over in the next village, but I hadn't known him, and I hadn't liked to ask who he was, when he was dancing with my girl. At least, any of the fellows I could have asked would have thought that Fran was my girl, and they'd have wondered what class of a man I was, to be letting someone I didn't know cut in on me. As if Fran would have let me object.

She had come alive when he danced with her, and when you saw them together on the floor they looked as though they'd been born to dance with each other.

He was a big man, not so tall, maybe, but wide and thick in the shoulder, and yet light as a feather on his feet. Yellow, wavy hair and a brown, handsome face, and he held Fran as if she belonged to him.

I went out and walked up the street and along the open hillside for maybe half a mile, but when I came back she was still dancing with him.

And now, walking home, I thought of the way she had looked at him, her eyes alive and her mouth waiting as if she was asking him to kiss her, and him a black stranger to her. I thought of the way he had held her, close in to him so that she seemed to be bending back a little over the hand at her waist.

Suddenly I couldn't bear it any longer. " Fran," I said, and I caught her by the arm and swung her round to face me, and that same moment the moon came out, and the empty fields were like silver on either side of us, and the road stretched like a white river behind us, empty as the fields.

I could see the way her eyebrows curved like bird's wings and the dark glisten of her mouth, and I forgot what I was going to say and put my arms round her and kissed her. For a moment her breast was soft against my body and her mouth soft and warm against my mouth.

Maybe if I had done that long ago, things would have been different. Maybe, for all the swagger of her, she needed a man to master her. Maybe she'd always despised me because I was too much in love with her and too afraid of her to try. But it was too late now.

I felt her stiffen, and then she drew her head back and pushed me away from her, so suddenly that she caught me off balance and sent me staggering across the road.

I caught my heel in the grass at the road's edge and fell into the hedge.

"Jamie the Book," she said, and laughed, but there was nothing kind in it. She didn't even walk off and leave me. She just stood waiting until I picked myself out of the hedge, as if she despised me too much even to be angry with me. And we walked all the way back to Ballysaggart without another word between us.

If I'd been a man at all I suppose I'd have left it at that. There were other girls I could have gone round with—indeed, I shouldn't have been worrying about girls at all, with the final exams at the Teachers' Training College over in Kilshannon coming off at the end of the summer. I should have been studying.

But my bedroom window looked down the length of the main street, and beyond it to the mountainside. If I looked up from the table where I was supposed to be working, I could see everything that happened in Ballysaggart. I could see old Mr. Clooney taking the shutters down from the bar windows just before ten o'clock. I could see Sheila Ryan shaking the mats outside the hotel door, and the car outside Mrs. Slattery's General Store where a commercial traveller was inside selling her something. And if I waited long enough I'd see Fran.

She used to help in Mrs. Slattery's shop, and sooner or later she'd come outside and stand in the sunlight for a minute, as if she was being stifled inside, among the rolls of calico and the trays of cotton reels, and the huge daisy-chains of saucepans and frying-pans and working-boots hanging from the ceiling. She'd stand there, with her hands on her hips and her red hair warmer than the sunlight, and until I saw her I couldn't work.

I didn't dare look down at my book in case I missed that one minute in the morning. Just to see her meant something. Even when she was angry. Even when she didn't know I was there. Just to see her standing, or moving. The shape of her breast under her dress and the way it lifted when she yawned and stretched, basking in the sunlight like a cat, a panther.

If the other girls in the village yawned, they put their fingers over their mouths and said, "Excuse me," and giggled, because they thought that that was manners. And they'd no more have stretched in public than they'd have stripped. A lot of them even walked with a bit of a stoop, so that they wouldn't show their figures too much.

But when Fran moved you could see that she enjoyed her body. And that was another reason that they didn't like her and were half afraid of her. They thought she was sinful. Just to look the way she did was sinful in a place like Ballysaggart.

The morning after the dance I was at my window, waiting, as I always was. I had *Principles of Teaching* open in front of me. But it was no good. I had to watch for Fran. And then, as I watched, I saw a man coming down the mountain road from the next village, the road we had come along the night before, after the dance. A man who walked swiftly, his shoulders throwing a wide shadow on the road and his head yellow as a buttercup in the sunlight. A man that any girl would turn her head to look at. The stranger.

I knew, long before he reached the end of the village street, that he was coming to see Fran. He didn't hesitate. He didn't look sideways, or glance at the names over the shops. He walked as though he owned the street and knew it like his own face in the mirror, and he went straight to Mrs. Slattery's shop. Fran must have described it to him very carefully for him to walk so straight to it.

And as if she knew that he was coming, as if she had heard his feet on the road, Fran chose that moment to come out and stretch herself in the sun. Her face lit up when she saw him, and she smiled, slowly and lazily and surely, and let him put his big hand on her shoulder, with half the street watching from behind their curtains, or peeping out of their doors, like Sheila Ryan and old Mr. Clooney.

But I couldn't watch. Suddenly I couldn't see very well and I had to look down at my book until my eyes cleared. And when I looked up again they were gone. I felt as if the sun had gone in and the winter come, in one sudden moment. I threw my book across the room and went running out of the house in my shirtsleeves as if I'd gone mad. I was halfway down the street before I asked myself what I was doing, and what I meant to do if I saw them. I went back to the house then, but only to get my coat and a stick, and come out again a bit more soberly, in case I was seen.

And for an hour I stravaiged up and down the hillsides round Ballysaggart, looking for the pair of them, although I still hadn't an idea in my mind as to why I was doing it. I scrambled through the heather and over grey, naked rocks that burnt my hands with the heat of them from the sun, until my bad leg ached and the sweat blinded my eyes so much that I couldn't have seen them if they were standing within five yards of me. At last I gave it up and went home again, flinging myself down on the bed and lying there until it was dark and the rage of jealousy inside me drove me out into the street again.

I wasn't out long before I heard all about the stranger that

had danced with Fran and come for her that same morning, laying his hand on her in broad daylight in the open street, and she letting him. The slut, they said. We always knew she was that kind of girl, we always knew it. And I didn't know whether I wanted to kill them for saying it, or Fran for giving them reason, or myself for misery. But I only asked them about the stranger.

" From Clare," they said, " where his father is an auctioneer. Rotten with money, and the boy down here spying out the land for a bit of a farm for himself. And maybe a wife."

They looked sideways at me when they said that, and laughed, and I know now why men sometimes run crazy in the streets and kill whomever they meet.

I walked the hills that night until I fell unconscious under a furze bush, and slept through until sunrise, and then crept home through the sleeping village, to sit at my window and watch for Fran to open up Mrs. Slattery's shop.

She came out at nine o'clock, her red hair spilling to her shoulders, and a green cotton dress tight to her body like the green bark on a willow branch, smooth as her skin. I watched her take down the shutters, and stand for a minute outside the door, yawning, her face still half asleep, her body bending as she stretched, first one way and then the other. She seemed to look different from any other morning. The sullenness had gone out of her and she was contented, fulfilled. Even the way she moved was different.

" Fran," I whispered, and as if she had heard me she turned towards my window and stretched again, her face alight with a kind of triumph, the sun washing her with gold. And then she took up the piled shutters with a strong, easy lift of her two hands and went inside, and there was nothing in the street, nothing for me anywhere.

During the next weeks it became the scandal of the parish. Fran and the stranger. That red-haired one and her fancy man. It's an odd thing about scandals. It wasn't anything they did or, at least, anything that people saw them doing. It was just who they were.

If Fran had gone into a convent, there would have been people in Ballysaggart to put a bad construction on it. And in some ways the stranger was the same kind of man as she was a woman. The sort of man to get talked about, whatever he did.

I can say that gently now, because all this was a long time ago. But at the time I hated him. I hated his yellow hair and his town-bought clothes and the sound of his voice, very loud

and confident. And I had enough opportunity for seeing him and hearing him and hating him because he almost lived in Ballysaggart once he had met Fran.

He'd be over all times of the day and evening on one excuse or another; to see a farm or a cow, or meet a man, or just plain and straight to meet Fran. And they'd go walking together, or dancing wherever there was a dance being held in the neighbourhood, or he'd be at her mother's cottage, telling the old woman the story of his life and how much money his father had, until the poor old fool thought that she couldn't sell him her daughter fast enough.

I never spoke to Fran any more. Not because I was too proud, but because I didn't get the chance, except when he was there too. And even for the sake of speaking to her, I couldn't bear to have her jeer at me in front of him. So I only watched her from my window, knowing that half the village was watching her also, and wishing her ill.

She hadn't been going with the stranger a month before the women were looking sideways at her figure, and the story started going round that he was married already; that he was engaged to a girl back in Ennis; or that anyway he hadn't the slightest intention of marrying Fran. And the last story I believed.

He wasn't the kind of man to marry any girl in a hurry. There were too many girls who would give him all he wanted without that. When he did marry it wouldn't be for red hair and a slim, supple body. It would be for money in the bank. He almost said as much, laughing in old Mr. Clooney's bar. And because he stood free drinks, there were plenty to laugh with him.

In fact, they hardly needed free drinks to make them laugh at that kind of idea. It suited them too well, the idea of Fran being left. It would be a kind of triumph, to see something they were half afraid of thrown down like that. And what the men laughed at the women gloated over. Fran left . . . and not the same way she had been found, either. And they smacked their lips and looked knowing and full of hatred, because Fran was young and beautiful and proud. I think the old women sitting under the guillotine and knitting as the heads fell, must have looked like the Ballysaggart women.

As the weeks went by I could feel the tension building; the people watching Fran and the stranger, watching for her to come to harm, for the man to leave her ruined and broken, waiting for the moment to come, like the Spanish people in their bullrings, waiting to see something splendid killed. The moment of truth, they call it. I could think of other names for such a moment, and the people who could be hungry for it.

I waited too, but in a kind of sick despair. Because I not only knew that it was coming, but I knew that Fran knew as well. And I watched her trying not to show it, trying not to believe it, as she walked down the street with her yellow-haired, fine-smiling lover; his feet so light and his face so handsome, and his body so graceful when he moved. He always walked as if he was beginning to dance.

Oh God, how I hated him. She'd smile at him, and then lift her head at the street, as if she was defying it, and all the eyes that were watching her; but I could see the shadow of fear round her mouth. And then the day came.

Quite suddenly, without any warning, as Fran was standing in the street in the morning sunshine, her head thrown back and her eyes half shut, waiting for the stranger to come to her.

He came swinging down the hillside, nothing in his face that was different to any other morning, his eyes smiling and lazy, his hands in his pockets and his shirt collar open to the sunlight. He nodded to old Mr. Clooney and some of the men who were leaning against the wall, waiting for the bar to open, and chucked Fran under the chin with his hand, the way you'd play with a child, or a dog. I think he wanted to show the men how she belonged to him.

It sounds a trifling sort of a thing to have started a quarrel between a man and a girl, but it was what was behind it that really made the trouble: the knowledge she had of how little she really meant to him, and the wish he had to be a great man, to have the other men laughing and envying him. It was the same sort of thing that made him so lavish with the free drinks. Maybe, for all his strength and his looks and his dancing, he wasn't so sure of himself. Maybe if you could see inside any man's mind, you'd pity him.

One of the loafers by the wall sniggered, and even from where I was, I could see Fran colouring. She struck his hand down and said something sharp, and he gave her an answer that made the men leaning along the wall laugh out loud. I found out afterwards that it was then he told her he was going the next day, and that he wouldn't be bothering about seeing her again.

If she hadn't flared at him, I don't think he would have told her at all. Just gone and left her to find out for herself. That was what everyone was expecting. But now he threw it at her, like a blow in the face, because she had struck his hand away and shown the loafers that he didn't own her completely.

I saw her go white, and for a long moment she stood quite still, her eyes almost shut, and her hands almost together as if she was going to fold them across her breast. And then she hit

him, with a full swing of her open hand that would have knocked most men down. It rang across the street like a gun shot and he nearly fell, staggering back to keep his balance.

The loafers stiffened against the wall, and a dozen curtains quivered in the windows along the street. This was the moment they had been waiting for. This was the moment when Fran of the red hair and the pride and the swagger would be broken. Whatever the stranger did, she would be broken. But they hoped that he would strike her back before he left her, so that they could have the symbol as well as the reality.

And he did strike her, sliding across the road with his dancer's, fighter's lightness, lifting his hand and then chopping her down with a horrible, chunky little blow that knocked her in a sprawl at his feet, her red hair tumbled in the dust, her arms flung sideways, her green dress like a leaf broken from the tree and fallen.

He stirred her with his foot and laughed, one hand to his own cheek where she had hit him, and he grinned round at the men watching. I'll give them grace that some of them looked uncomfortable, but none of them stirred—none of them said a word that a stranger had struck a girl of their own village in front of them. Some of them even laughed.

I couldn't see or think for a moment, and when I came to myself I was halfway down the stairs with a blackthorn stick in my hand. But I didn't run. I was too sure to need to run. I was going to break him. Break him as he had broken Fran.

I walked quite slowly, limping up the street, looking at his yellow hair in the sunlight, his wide shoulders, and the one hand at his cheek. And at Fran, gathering herself onto her knees close to his feet, almost as if she were kneeling to him, looking round as though she couldn't quite believe that she had no friend at all, no one who'd so much as lift his voice for her. I was behind her and she never saw me coming.

Neither did the stranger at first. It was the men along the wall who saw me, and their eyes turning told the stranger that the thing wasn't over yet. He looked up when I was quite close to him and grinned a little awkwardly.

"Get a stick," I said, and one of the men that had a blackthorn threw it to him. There was more fighting in those days than there is now, and neither of us needed to say anything.

He kicked Fran away from him, the way you'd lift a kitten on the point of your shoe, and swung the stick in his two hands, getting the weight of it. The street started filling, quietly but quickly, until there was a ring of men. No women, but they

were watching from the windows. The only woman in the street was Fran.

We moved into the middle of the ring, each with a blackthorn and the knowledge that only one of us was going to be walking when the fight was over. We could hear each other's breathing and the small, soft scuffle of our shoes as we shifted our feet.

He was looking very confident, because as I've told you I'm not a big man, and I have a limp. But because of those things I'd needed to learn how to fight with my brain as well as my hands. And also, I was fighting for the one thing I cared about on earth. He was just fighting because he had to.

We moved round, slowly at first and then faster, swaying our bodies almost like a ritual, like dancers instead of fighters. But that was to get the feel of the ground and each other.

And then suddenly he broke the rhythm, jumping zigzag, once left, once right, and both times forward, his stick swinging in a short, hooking circle towards my head. I shifted my grip, one hand up and one down along the length of my own stick, breaking the force of his blow with it and then jabbing at his face with the point. It broke one of his teeth, and some of the men watching hissed as they saw the blood. The hiss distracted me for a fraction of a second and in that instant he caught me off guard.

I saw his stick coming, low and sweeping at my bad knee, and I knew that if it hit me I was finished. I was off balance to jump, and I couldn't parry, the way I was still holding my stick. All I could do was sink down and take the weight of his blow on my hip.

It struck like a log falling, and I thought that I was finished after all, that I couldn't straighten again. My hip felt as if it was broken, and I saw his stick lifting over my head, black and heavy against the blue of the sky. But he lifted too high, waited a shade too long. I think he glanced round the ring for admiration. And when the stick came down I was ready.

I moved sideways, and it hit the ground beside me almost hard enough to splinter it, and in the same instant I hit his ankle, once, twice, fast and sure; not looking to anyone for admiration, but only intent on breaking him; breaking him as he had broken Fran.

He cried out and stumbled, and I hit him on the side of the knee and then the elbow so that he dropped his stick and flung up his hands. I hit him on his yellow, dazzling, sun-bright head, and across the small of his back, and he fell down on the ground, covering his head with his arms, kneeling slowly as if he was going to say his prayers.

You can hurt even a big man with a blackthorn stick. Hurt him very terribly. And worse than terribly if you know how to use it and where to hit.

He knelt down like a tree falling, and by the grace of these things he knelt down in front of Fran.

She herself was still kneeling, only half risen from where he had sent her sprawling when the fight started, the grey dust of the street scattered on her green dress and chestnut hair, the side of her face a sullen, darkening red where he had struck her. I hit him a last time and he fell down on his face in the dust, the blood running in a thin crimson ribbon out of his mouth.

"Is this your man?" I said to her. "Is this your lover?" And she looked at me very strangely across the fallen bulk of the great hero, the woman-pleaser, with his town clothes and his spending money, and his hunger to be admired.

I can be sorry for him now. I was almost sorry for him even then. But Fran was all that I cared about, and I had a terror that out of some idiot pride she would cling to the man just because he was fallen. As if he would thank her, or stay with her. But I couldn't plead.

"Is he yours?" I repeated, and was afraid to look at her, afraid of the answer I would see in her eyes before I heard it in her voice.

And slowly, very slowly, she shook her head, and smiled, a queer, heart-broken little smile, as if, quite suddenly, she had learnt a lot of things, and found them too sad for weeping. But all she said was my name, very softly, so that no one in the crowd about us could hear.

"Jamie the Book," she said, with a funny kind of tenderness in her voice. "Jamie the Book."

I lifted her to her feet, and we walked down the street together, the ring opening for us. And I tried not to limp, tried not to know what they were thinking, that Fran was a girl who'd go with the man who beat her lover, just because he beat her lover. But even though I knew what they were thinking, I didn't really care, because I knew that it wasn't true. I knew it from the way she had smiled at me, half ashamed, half kindred, the two of us together—the red-haired one, and Jamie the Book who half killed the poor stranger.

And suddenly I laughed, thinking of what they'd say. I laughed aloud, for all the pain in my hip and the shame of everything.

And beside me, Fran threw back her head and laughed as well, laughed at herself, laughed because the sun was shining, laughed because we'd found each other, the odd ones out. You

could almost hear the shocked whispering there was behind the lace curtains down the street.

But we walked like royalty down the length of it to my mother's house, I limping and Fran with her bruised face and the dust of the street on her dress, and her flame-red hair. Like royalty, I tell you. Royalty.

★ ★ ★

ANSWERS to MIXED BAG on page 29

1. *Colonel Sir John Hunt, whose expedition conquered Everest*
2. *b. (Job, xix, 20)*
3. *a. two (bird) b. none (fish) c. none (walking-stick)*
4. *Hablot Knight Browne (Phiz) was the original illustrator of most of the works of Dickens (Boz)*
5. *a. cite b. woods c. double d. lay*
6. *two and three-quarter inches*
7. *a. 112 lbs. (G.B.), 100 lbs. (U.S.A.)*
   b. a million millions (G.B.), a thousand millions (U.S.A.)
   c. support for stockings (G.B.), braces (U.S.A.)
   d. Federation of British Industries (G.B.), Federal Bureau of Investigation (U.S.A.)

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144

Across. 1, *Hogsheads.* 5, *Scald.* 8, *Editress.* 9, *Weapon.* 11, *Angli.* 12, *Columbine.* 13, *Canary.* 15, *Overturn.* 18, *Yellower.* 20, *Intern.* 23, *Bagatelle.* 24, *Set up.* 26, *Trying.* 27, *Frighten.* 28, *Saner.* 29, *Party line.*

Down. 1, *Hierarchy.* 2, *Going.* 3, *Harrier.* 4, *Alsace.* 5, *Steamer.* 6, *Amplitude.* 7, *Dance.* 10, *Clove.* 14, *Nell Gwynn.* 16, *Ninepence.* 17, *Wells.* 19, *Oftener.* 21, *Nosegay.* 22, *Nearer.* 23, *Butts.* 25, *Tutti.*

★ ★ ★

WITH A DASH

Somehow I do not fancy myself with a hyphen—particularly after having heard the story about the lady who introduced herself to her table companion at dinner, Lord Dewar, as "Vere-Vere—with a hyphen:" and afterwards asked him his name, to which he replied: "Dewar-Dewar—with a syphon!" Lord Dewar was, of course, the owner of a very large whisky business.

HORACE SMITH,
A Horseman Through Six Reigns

FORTY DAY ROAD

BY CHRISTOPHER LANDON

IF you look at a map of Egypt and run your finger south down the River Nile, you come to a town called Asyut. South-west of this is a spot marked as the Kharga Oasis; below it, a large blank space. If it is an enlightened map, there may be one or two dots there with names like Shebb, Safsaf, and Bir Mirr.

Just possibly, there may be a wavering dotted line that comes up out of Africa and cuts across through Kharga to Asyut. If it is there it will be marked Darb el Arba'in, the Forty Day Road.

When the war was over and all the shooting and shouting finished, it should have been easy for me to walk out of the Demob Centre, shaking the sand from my shoes for ever, and go back in complete content to Fort William to sell the Company's lorries until the end of my days.

But I couldn't forget the desert.

I was home—among the purple and grey, the mists and the shining water—but all the time the other thing, the contrast, was reaching out in my thoughts to draw me back. I used to dream of it; the open horizon, the play of all the shades of colour, the dawns, the cleanliness, and the timelessness. I knew that some day, somehow, I should have to go back.

Chance came to help me within a year. It was luck that I read the advertisement: a rival concern wanted urgently a sales representative in Cairo. I didn't wait to write. I telephoned there and then. By the time I had finished with their personnel manager, I was an expert on desert transport and Egypt in general. About a third of what I said was true, and I managed to remember a sufficient number of the names of those in authority to prove my points. To my delight and surprise, I was air-bound for Cairo within three weeks. It was quite different there, of course: uneasy—we were the servants now, not the masters—but I put up with that, and the routine, for the time off. Then, sometimes alone, sometimes with a friend, I would set out in a demonstration truck to re-explore all the old loneliness.

One day the General Manager sent for me. He said, " Do you know the desert south-west of Kharga Oasis? " I didn't—but I had always wanted to go there. With a quick salve to my

conscience that, given maps and a compass, experience and unlimited confidence, one stretch of desert is much the same as another, I said, "Yes—slightly," and found I had bought the leadership of an expedition to the oases of the Shebb group.

It was partly a matter of demonstrating our vehicles to the Egyptian Government, since there was a big contract in the offing—and partly a matter of locusts. There had been reports of big swarms in the Sudan; then they had disappeared to the north, but no one knew where. If the danger had turned west, it was the worry of Libya and then the French; if it was lurking, ready to descend on the Lower Nile and the Delta, the Egyptians must know. There was only one chain of living green spots in the blank space between. They had to find out if there was any sign of eating or egg-froth there, at Shebb, Safsaf, Bir Mirr, and the rest; also, they wanted to get that information for nothing. In view of the contract, it had been suggested that the firm should find the transport, and a navigator who was an expert—in fact, they had fallen back on me.

There was nothing to the trip, though it was virtually unexplored, unsurveyed country. We had two of the latest trucks and every possible bit of equipment to help. We—myself, two Egyptians from the Ministry, and an American bug doctor who had been lent as the bloodhound—moved for day after day over the great smooth sand-sheets, while the mirage stretched up and up all around the horizon until there was nothing left but a little circle of blinding blue sky straight overhead.

The truck itself did not seem to move; it was stationary, floating in the centre of a yellow bowl, while the sand rushed by, soundless, beneath it. Once or twice we crossed other tracks of wheels, looking as fresh as if they had been made that morning, although we knew no one had been there for at least fifteen years.

Nothing was real; we would float for ever in the middle of this bowl of unreality. Only the map-board on my knee and the needle of the compass pulled me back to the present.

We found all those dots on the blank—I would not call them oases, for they were far from the idea of sheltering palms, grass, and cool clear water. They came to us as straight black rods dancing on the edge of the mirage, cleared to high cones of sand interlaced with dark dead tamarisk, one living plume blowing from the top in the wind.

There was no egg-froth anywhere, no eaten foliage, not even a dead locust. Painstakingly, we went from one to the other, but they had not been there. They must have turned west, or back into the Sudan. The job was done and we started back for the Nile. It was then that we crossed the Forty Day Road.

I had seen it marked on the map and asked about it, but no one knew very much. One of the Egyptians had volunteered that it was the ancient slave route from Africa, used by the big caravans in the old days, but not for the last hundred years.

Like everything else, it appeared first in the mirage. At the edge of the yellow bowl in front of us dark jagged spikes hovered, some in line, like the ribs of a wrecked ship. They cleared to bones: low heaps of bones, so white that the sand between them seemed to take on a darker hue. Scattered at first, but closer and closer together as we came nearer the Road itself. Then we were on it.

There was a strip of desert, an avenue as wide as a block, stretching out in each direction and flanked with the white bones to vanishing point: down the centre, clear in the hard ground, sometimes blotted out in drifting sand, but always reappearing farther on, was a row of parallel grooves. They were twenty feet apart and thirty to the row, as if someone had drawn a giant rake over the desert—on and on, until they became one line and then vanished. They had been made by the shuffling feet of countless camels that had walked the Road.

We turned north and followed it. When the grooves faded under the sand the way was still clear, for there was never a break in the white heaps that slid by on either side. The sun was low when we came up to the blockhouse.

It was perched on a mound. Square, built of stone slabs, very old. There were no doors or roof left. I wanted to camp there, but the Egyptians said, "No. Scorpions," so we moved the trucks down to the hollow where the well had been before the sand had swallowed it up.

That incident was typical. The Egyptians had stuck together like glue all through the party; they had been civil but unfriendly, and on anything except navigation had given the orders. I didn't mind—I was thinking of the firm—but I could see it irked Hank more and more each day we had been travelling. I liked him, that bug doctor. He was young to have such a string of degrees after his name, and he'd a grand sense of humour on all subjects except this.

By the time I had checked the trucks and plotted the next day's course, the sun's rim had bitten into the western horizon. This is the time when the desert is the most beautiful: when you can watch the shadows snake and flow, like purple water, into every ripple of the sand: when the arch of the sky shades clear through every tone of pink and lavender to the black night sliding up from the east.

I watched for a moment and then went over to where Hank was standing, halfway between the two vehicles, scowling at the Egyptians' truck. He had a bottle of Bourbon in one hand.

"What's the matter, Hank?"

He stared at me. "I've just remembered it's my birthday. I asked those two to have a drink and they said no. They've just gone off to cook that stinking mess of theirs and we shan't see them again tonight."

"Many happy returns," I said, "—and don't bother about them. We'll celebrate."

We did. Too well—for when the Bourbon was finished, there was only the bottle of gin in my kit, and I should have known they wouldn't mix. But it was nice to sit there just drinking under the stars—so close they seemed that you felt you could reach up and pick them out of the sky. All might still have been well if I hadn't said I was hungry.

Hank said he would prepare something special in honour of his birthday. He had never cooked before so far from civilization and he took the hell of a long time to do it. When he came back with the plates, he announced that it was devilled lobster. It was lobster—tinned—but heaven knows what he had done with it: to me it seemed to have been fried in cayenne and some of the Bourbon he had kept back. But it was good.

The party died naturally after that, and we crawled off to our beds by the truck. It was about one in the morning when I woke up. In the pit of my stomach there was a large round boulder that was trying to burrow its way out and into the sand; I twisted and turned, but it wouldn't go. The only thing was to try and walk it off.

While I pulled on my boots I could hear Hank snoring peacefully—a digestion like an ostrich. I slipped a compass in my pocket and set off to the north up the Road.

A great yellow moon had come up, and it was cool, absolutely still, with all the desert bathed in pale light. The Road looked even more strange and impressive. The grooves were straight black lines drawn over the pallid plain going on and on to infinity.

On either side the bones gleamed, some, as the soft light held them, glowing like pearls: then a skull, thin, slewed sideways from a column of neck-bones, would be looking at me, grinning.

I walked on—always the straight lines ahead, always the white heaps gliding by on either side. There was not a sound but the pad of my boots on the sand. The way narrowed between two outcrops of rock, and the bones pressed closer, a solid white bank now, with no sand showing between them. I sat down with my back against a boulder and lit a pipe.

The moonlight and the silence flowed down on me. The pain was better. I must have dozed.

When the noise came I was awake completely and instantly. Ten days of sleeping in the open had conditioned me back to the old days of the desert war, when sleep was a suspended state in which the ears were never shut. From the same ingrained habit, I looked first at my watch. It was a quarter to two.

The noise is difficult to describe: soft, but with intense power and penetration. There was more feeling to it than sound. Whatever caused it was coming up the road from the south.

I stared down the converging lines and they did not seem to go on as far as they did before: something was moving slowly forward to blot them out. It came on like a broad wall, and at last sight and sound blended to give the answer. One camel marching on sand is soundless. Five hundred, a thousand—no counting them—were not.

They came towards me thirty abreast, each one to a separate track, white and grey, swaying in the rhythm of their stride. They were piled high with bales and water-skins; robed men leading them. There was an impression of horsemen in front and to the flank. I pressed back against the rocks waiting for what I knew would come after the first division.

First, the sound changed: through the slow regular pad of the camel feet came a low tuneless chant that was repeated over and over again. Then I could see the long black lines stretching back and back, rocking from side to side in unison as they shuffled along . . . Black men, black women with babies at the hip and the breast. The steel chains that passed down each line from wrist to wrist shone like silver snakes in the moonlight. They were abreast of me before the smell came: not unclean, but musky, tropical, alien to the clean sand.

While the second division of camels were passing, one of the flank guards found me. My hands were tied behind me and I was roped to the side of a camel to plod on with the caravan while the moon went down and the stars faded and then the dawn flamed up from Asia. Not once do I remember being afraid: only curious, disbelieving, and desperately anxious to explain.

That was the worst thing afterwards. I knew that I never had explained, had never been able to get through to them. All I understood was their orders to me—there were no questions from them, only commands. They did not seem curious. They let me know by signs what was wanted, for their Arabic was strange—too guttural for me to understand.

When they made camp after dawn, I was taken to the leaders

as they sat in a ring round the fire of blazing tamarisk. They fingered my clothes, passed from hand to hand the watch and compass. When I grew bold enough to try and explain the uses of the last, they threw it in the fire Then I was taken back and tethered beside my camel.

I was fed and watered. Each night and morning there was a small skin of brackish, foul-smelling water, and a wad of dried dates; little enough, but it was all that they had themselves. I noticed how the long black rows, squatting on the sand, were served with exactly the same fare; how, every evening, the leaders went down the line, examining each body before the march.

If there was a sign of bleeding feet or sores, the chain was struck off and the sufferer carried to the rear, to be loaded on one of the camels that had been lightened of its load of water. And, of course, I understood it. Slaves were valuable: a value that increased in proportion every mile as they drew nearer the market—and remained fit. The whole being of the enterprise centred on that. One does not carry a bag of gold a thousand miles to let it drain away in the sand.

The pattern of black and white went on. The shuffling forward under the carpet of stars with the pad of the camel's feet beside me and that unending tune creeping through from the rear; the silent inquisition at the dawn camp-fire before I huddled under the cloth they had given me against the heat of the day.

Was it four days, or five? I don't remember. I could not escape, and seemed to lack the desire. They thought me strangely afflicted: not to be killed, but not allowed to go.

They used to watch me curiously when they were at their prayers. I, in turn, watched the slaves. They did not seem unhappy, but apathetic. Not once did I see one ill-treated. They used to squat there, motionless, enduring the heat, waiting: waiting for something that was to come and of which they knew nothing.

That last evening, in the cool, just before we moved off, something happened that gave me the only real contact with my guard. Suddenly, from the end of the black lines, a wailing and a screaming started from the women, increasing in volume as it travelled on. I stared back to see the children being wrenched from their mothers' arms, and carried or driven like a flock of black goats towards the rear of the caravan.

My guard was standing beside me and must have seen the look on my face. He smiled and began to speak. Somehow, for the first time, I understood.

"Do not fear for the children," he said, "they will not be

harmed. Soon we reach Kharga—and the end of the Road. The Egyptians—" he spat on the ground—" at the customs there will tax everything. So we put the children in the empty water-skins, and sometimes they are not noticed."

We moved off, and soon were winding down a rocky gorge. I began to feel very tired. And then everything became fainter and fainter.

I woke, alone and shivering, to see vast, thousand-foot cliffs ringed round me, with the flat basin of the oasis laid out below At once, I knew that it was Kharga.

I stumbled down to the nearest patch of millet, and there was a fellah watering it from an irrigation ditch. As he swung up the long counterbalanced pole, I saw that the water receptacle at the other end was something that I knew and could understand —a four-gallon petrol-tin. The fellah took me to the police-post.

They kept me in hospital for a long time, and I played dumb and didn't know a thing. I expect you'll agree I was right. In the end they decided that it was just possible for someone with loss of memory to walk a hundred and ten miles in four days and nights without water, and survive. That was the distance from where I vanished on my midnight walk to the point where I surfaced at Kharga. They couldn't explain why, when Hank had called for search by radio, the planes found no trace of me.

I kept my mouth shut, and did a little reading and a few sums. I couldn't find out much about the Forty Day Road—except that it was still in use in 1795, and was supposed to have been over a thousand miles long; perhaps forty stages of about twenty-seven miles each.

You see, four times twenty-seven is nearly a hundred and ten. So I kept my mouth shut—tight.

Tighter still when they tried to ask me about those raw, chafed rings that were seared into each wrist.

★ ★ ★

H_2 *EAU*

Water, plain drinking-water, is practically unknown in Paris. . . . An English friend of mine once ordered plain water in a restaurant and the waiter did not seem to understand.

" Mineral water? . . . Soda water? " he suggested hopefully.

" No," my friend insisted. " Ordinary, plain drinking-water. You know perfectly well what I mean." The *garçon* thought the proposition over for another moment and then a glimmer of understanding appeared in his eyes: " Oh—you mean umbrella juice? "

GEORGE MIKES, *Little Cabbages*

CARTE BLANCHE

I KNOW a little restaurant
Behind a brownstone stoop
Where *potage du jour* is French
For a can of onion soup.

You order a Martini without an olive in it;
They bring you a Martini, it has an olive in it.
Throw the olive on the floor,
That's what the floor is for.

The tables teem with ladies
Tuned up by Mistress Arden,
And Muzak fills the air
With " In a Persian Garden."

You order legs of frog, and please omit the garlic;
They bring you legs of frog, all redolent of garlic.
Throw the frogs' legs on the floor,
That's what the floor is for.

The Daiquiris are flowing
Before the meal and after;
The smoke from fifty filter tips
Is shaken by the Schraffter.

You ask them for an ashtray, a receptacle for ashes;
They do not bring an ashtray, instead they bring a menu.
Throw the ashes on the floor,
That's what the floor is for.

I know a little restaurant
Where client and agent grapple,
Where *ananas au kirsch*
Is French for canned pineapple.

You ask them for the check, for *l'addition*, for the bill;
They do not bring the check, they bring another menu.
Throw the menu on the floor,
Walk quickly through the door,
That's what the door is for.

OGDEN NASH, *Try it Suns. and Hols., it's closed then*

HEART OF THE STORM

BY DAVID BEATY

David Beaty, who was introduced to Argosy readers this year with his story, "Rate of Descent," is well qualified, by his experience in the R.A.F. and subsequently with B.O.A.C., to convey both the routine and the thrills of flying. In this extract from his new novel he shows the tension, courage, and skill that come into play when Mark Kelston, piloting his Marlborough, Easy Zebra, finds himself pitted against Nature's most dangerous challenge—a hurricane with a force a million times more powerful than that of the airliner involved in its clutches.

A HURRICANE in the Caribbean Sea, nicknamed Felicity after the whimsical manner of meteorological officers, had made a brief and spectacular appearance as a series of closely packed concentric circles on all the weather charts of the world.

For three days it had steamed, as leisurely as a paddle-steamer, towards Cuba and Miami. There seemed every likelihood that it would follow the well-worn path of its ancestors up the American seaboard, and recurve to the right, south of Newfoundland. But suddenly it disappeared. For a week no sign of it was reported.

The forecasters said it had decayed, spun itself out, committed suicide. Felicity, however, was very much alive. Instead of moving west, like a big black sheep, it had strayed in the opposite direction. In the middle of a deserted Atlantic, far away from the shipping lanes, it had dawdled and sunned itself. Then it had started, stealthily and unseen, to move north-east, towards the Azores.

By now, it was middle-aged and had begun to spread. The speed of its terrifying roundabout had dropped from 100 miles an hour to a little less than 80. It was halfway through mellowing into a severe storm. But its influence was far greater.

Huge areas of sea began to feel its presence, and in the air above them the winds were being dictated by the furious counter-clockwise circulation around its quiet heart. And instead of moving at a sedate 8 knots, it was shooting across the Atlantic faster than the most modern destroyer at full speed.

Felicity gave little warning. Weather-ship *Easy*, stationed near the middle of the 2,000 miles separating Bermuda from the Azores, started to pitch and roll in a sudden swell. Before the meteorologists on board could work out the cause, the morning sky darkened, and the north-west corner of the storm was upon them.

Now, Easy Zebra, a Marlborough aircraft, G-AHEZ, of British Empire Airways, was well in the grey mass of Felicity's enormous web. For such a frail-looking cockleshell, she was showing an almost impudent unconcern. The storm had the punch of more than four atom bombs, attenuated maybe by the wide area of its structure, but still powerful and still dangerous.

Great unseen hands seemed to clutch out of the grey blankness in a grab for the aircraft. But each time, Easy Zebra just shivered in all her thin eighth-of-an-inch plates, soared up or plunged down, squirming out of the storm's gap. Although, outside, an icy wind roared at over 90 miles an hour, within the aircraft's fuselage there was no other sound but the accustomed steady humming of her motors, and the clatter of the rain on her metal skin.

Inside, certainly, it was impossible to walk. The lunch the steward had been about to serve was indefinitely postponed. Most of the sixteen passengers on board felt ill. A Mr. Parkinson, a Very Important Person, a member of numerous political boards—the Captain, Mark Kelston, had had a note from the Company requesting him to see that Mr. Parkinson " had a comfortable trip " —strapped and imprisoned in his seat, had been sick in a most undignified way all over himself.

But these were minor things. Slowed down considerably by the winds against her, Easy Zebra still managed to slip through the storm at over 160 miles an hour.

Down in the Atlantic, a little farther to the east, a Portuguese tramp steamer called the *Santa Lucinda* was not so fortunate. Her plates were many times as strong as Easy Zebra's. Her weight was 2,000 tons compared with the aircraft's 40. But she moved the way the storm pushed her, her engine-room flooded by the endless sea. Felicity had, after all, caught something in its web. Something far more substantial than an outsize tin fly.

In his position behind the pilots, Radio Officer Draper was moving up against his straps every time a bounce lifted him off his seat. As a result, his log for the last half-hour was an appalling scrawl, in contrast to the neat clerical hand of the first part of the trip. The earphones were jammed over his head, and he was listening hard. A sad little rhythm of dots and dashes, not unlike a wood-pigeon's call in the evening, was making a badly matched fight against the crackling static of the storm.

He turned to Kelston. " Some poor bastard's sending an SOS, Skipper."

The Captain had appeared to be concentrating entirely on the instruments that guided the safe keeping of Easy Zebra. Now he allowed his mind to take in what Draper had told him, while his hands and his eyes, experienced and well-disciplined,

carried on the mechanical motions of flying the aircraft through heavy turbulence.

" Ship? "

" Oh yes, Skipper . . . ship. Name's the *Santa Lucinda*."

In Draper's mind, that was that. A ship in her own element should be well able to take care of herself.

He would have expected surface vessels to alter course to go to the help of an aircraft in danger of falling out of the sky. An aeroplane, after all, was a butterfly form of travel, the delicate youngest child of transportation. The distance she could go was severely limited. Special Air-Sea-Rescue aircraft certainly might be used for such operations. But an ordinary airliner could only look after herself.

Kelston jolted these thoughts clean out of his mind. " You got the position of her? "

" A position? Yes . . . she did send a position."

" Give it to Mr. Bates to plot on his chart. I want to know how far away she is."

" But a couple of tugs have already left Ponta Delgada, Skipper." Draper's voice implied that this was none of their business.

" All the same . . . do as I tell you."

There was a muffled interchange between Draper and Bates, the Navigator, who then shouted up, " She's about 30 miles south of our track, Skipper . . . only 20 miles from the harbour on San Miguel. Still over three hours' flying away, if this damned head wind keeps up."

" Thanks, Mr. Bates."

The Navigator looked at the Captain anxiously. Till now, Bates had always found him sensible. However, he saw no harm in pointing out, " We'll be over an hour late, Skipper."

" I'd expected something like that."

" And our own position . . ." Bates made a helpless shrugging gesture at the cocoon of violent air that now smothered them.

" We should get Horta Beacon," Kelston said.

Bates looked doubtful. " If the static isn't too bad."

" Static's terrible, sir," Draper said promptly.

That was another trick Felicity had up its sleeve. The jumbling electrical interference might howl down the signal sent from a beacon, and could pull the needle on the radio compass far away from pointing to the station.

Kelston appeared to take no notice of them. " Work out a fuel state for me, Mr. Hawkins, please," he said. Then he added to Shaughnessy, the First Officer, " They'll have a tough job finding her in weather like this."

The First Officer didn't answer. He was gazing in hypnotized fascination at the way the leading edge of the starboard wing was furring up with a deposit of millions of tiny diamond-coloured crystals.

" Ice, Skipper." He said, trying to keep his voice from sounding excited.

" Bit on the windscreen, too," Kelston said. He put on the windscreen anti-icers and watched the alcohol seep over the glass, mixing in with the sleet.

He asked Shaughnessy, " How much on your wing? "

" About an inch . . . but it's still building up."

Kelston looked down at the temperature gauge for the outside air. It was very high for the altitude at this time of year—minus fourteen degrees. Hawkins, the Engineer, had heard the magic word *ice*, and he struggled out of his seat to look for himself. When the stuff started to form on an aircraft, something had to be done. Fast.

" Going to go up, Skipper? " the Engineer asked " I reckon the old tub'll reach 23,000. At this weight." He had looked in the maintenance log-book and found EZ was just recently off a Check Four, a thorough overhaul done every 1,200 hours' flying.

" No, down. Mr. Draper, get me a clearance from Control to descend to 11,000 feet." Then he noticed that the Radio Officer was busy sending, and he waited, while Hawkins and Shaughnessy impatiently watched the cloud paint another layer of ice on the wing.

As Easy Zebra started to take on this extra frozen cargo, her weight increased. The jagged edges of the formation were spoiling the flying properties of her wings. The needle of the airspeed indicator now fluttered around 150 knots.

" Lost nearly 10 knots already," Hawkins muttered to the First Officer.

Kelston heard him and smiled. " Still another 50 knots to go before we actually stall, Mr. Hawkins," he said. " Have you got those fuel figures yet? "

" I've nearly finished them, Skipper."

Just then Draper's hand suddenly started to push against Hawkins's substantial body, which was blocking the small space between the two pilots. The Engineer edged to one side, and looked down at the Radio Officer.

" What's the matter . . . what's the rush? " he asked, as he sat down again at his panel.

" Message," Draper shouted. " Urgent. The tugs can't find the ship. Control are asking, have we the fuel to help? " It was not, in Draper's opinion, a reasonable request.

" Tell 'em yes." Kelston's words snapped back at him so suddenly, Draper bounced in his seat again. Not this time from the storm. " Ask Control to clear all levels below us."

" No aircraft up, Skipper. Air-Sea Rescue at Lagens is out for weather. Gale-force cross wind."

" Tell them . . . we'll be glad to help."

Hawkins turned round with the fuel figures. " Only 8,000 pounds of fuel left, Skipper," he said dubiously. " And we're still in hot air."

" Static's terrible even at this height," Draper put in. " Wouldn't be surprised if we couldn't hear a damn thing near the deck."

Bates came pushing forward from the navigation compartment. "If I can get a word in edgeways, Skipper—looks like we'll be an hour and a half late over the island. The trouble now is the speed."

Shaughnessy and Draper immediately looked at the airspeed indicator. It had crept back to just below 135 knots.

"Fifteen inches," Kelston called out. "Hang on to your hats . . . we're going down to find her."

The motors died down to a slow, protesting grumble, as Easy Zebra's nose dipped towards the storm-tossed sea, three and a half miles below her.

Kelston knew that the request to search for the *Santa Lucinda* was an unusual one. Several times, aircraft had been asked to keep a look-out for a ship in difficulties near their course, which meant nothing more than a vigilant, and almost invariably fruitless watch over the water. As Captain of the aircraft, his first responsibility was to the twenty-three souls on board Easy Zebra. He had already decided that he had an extra margin of safety which would be spent looking for the ship.

But what was that margin in hours and minutes? And how could he use it to the best advantage? Used to splitting up his attention, part to flying, which had always to go on, part to an emergency or difficulty that had suddenly arisen, he started, as always, to make his plans well in advance.

He knew it wasn't going to be easy. They were late and he would have to go slow on the petrol consumption. Then there was the question of getting down safely below the base of the storm clouds, which he reckoned would probably be about 800 feet.

The islands of the Azores were scattered with high volcanic mountains, one of which—Pico—rose up nearly 8,000 feet into the air. And at the time she approached them, the position of Easy Zebra (due to a complete absence of radio- or astro-fixes) would be anybody's guess within a circle of probability as much as 100 miles in diameter.

"Ask Control if they've got the winds at the lower levels," he told Draper. "Should have got some information on this stuff by now."

Draper was still muttering about the static, as he keyed out Control's call-sign. "Wouldn't be surprised if I'm stone-deaf after this," he prophesied gloomily to Hawkins.

Just as they were passing through 14,000 feet, the air became smoother. They seemed to have emerged out of a colony of cumulo-nimbus cloud into the dank undergrowth of less violent stratus.

"D'you think you can take over, Mr. Shaughnessy?" Kelston asked.

"I'll try, sir." The boy gingerly gripped the wheel.

"See the speed doesn't go above 170 knots . . . there may be bumps . . . big ones."

Kelston watched him. He was not very expert. Easy Zebra was now rolling as much from his movements on the control column as from the air currents of the storm. But even though he was heavily overcorrecting, Kelston saw that he was coping. Shaughnessy doing the flying would allow him a little more time to think.

Ice was still forming, rather quicker now the temperature was approaching zero degrees centigrade. But that didn't worry Kelston particularly. The freezing-level should be around 5,000 feet. Below that height, they'd be able to burn the stuff off pretty fast.

He was also certain that the weather over Santa Anna would be poor, but there would not be fog. The high winds would see to that, blowing a gap between the earth and the cloud which would provide reasonable visibility for landing.

He glanced at the altimeter. The needles were nearing 10,000 feet. He told Shaughnessy, " Keep her at this height." Then he noticed that the First Officer was getting more used to the sudden movements of the aircraft in the uneven air. " You're doing all right."

Shaughnessy flushed with pleasure.

" Think you can manage on your own for a while? "

" I think so, sir."

" I want a word with Bates. And I suppose the passengers had better be told what we're doing."

" Seems a little smoother now, sir."

" Yes . . . but for how long? "

Kelston put his seat back, and hunching himself up to avoid the ignition switches on the roof, clambered out of the front position. There was enough room for his tall, rather lanky body to stretch full length, just behind the engineer. He felt suddenly stiff and cramped after so much heavy flying.

" Engines seem O.K.," he said to Hawkins, looking at the instruments on the panel.

" No worry there, sir."

He walked on to the navigation compartment. Bates was sitting with his arms folded. The only thing he could do now was to keep his eye on the airspeed, and occasionally plot their dead-reckoning position.

" I'll tell you what I think we can do," Kelston said to him. " Even with strong easterlies, we estimate Santa Anna in about 95 minutes. Right? "

" Right, sir."

" Winds down here should be less. Even so . . . gives us just over an hour to search, with the fuel we've got available."

" Cutting it a bit fine, isn't it, sir? "

" We've *got* to cut it fine. Some men are down there in that sea." Bates said nothing. " Now the ship's only 20 miles or so off Ponta Delgada. We've got to avoid the mountains. With this static, the Horta Beacon will be bad. So I plan to go over it

at 10,000 feet. Then turn out away from Pico, and make a quick descent to the sea."

"What height d'you reckon the cloud will be?"

"A thousand . . . probably less. But with this wind, it won't be on the deck."

"D'you want me to alter for Horta?"

"Yes. Pass the new course up to Shaughnessy."

"It'll make us a bit later." Bates looked none too happy.

"Number Two engine's all right, isn't she, Mr. Bates?" Kelston asked suddenly.

"Oh yes, sir . . . Number Two's still doing fine."

"Well, then . . . what's there to worry about?"

Bates managed a grin. "Nobody's worried around here, sir."

"Good," Kelston said. "Let's hope the same goes for the passenger compartment."

But he didn't really expect it would. And it didn't. The smell in the place was nauseating. Kelston knew from experience that a quarter of his passengers would be frightened of flying in the best of conditions. In a bad storm, that proportion would increase to well over half.

Standing with difficulty, trying to balance himself in the turbulence, he looked at the faces in the rows in front of him. Briefly, he tried to explain to them what he intended to do. He told them about the ship in distress, without available help to find her position. Searching for her would mean another hour or so of bouncing around in the storm for them. And already they were late.

He said gently, "You would all want us to do everything in our power to help, wouldn't you?"

There was a slight pause. Then a man with a well-trimmed pointed beard said, as though he was the spokesman, "Of course, Captain. Do everything you can. We'll be all right."

Mr. Parkinson, the only V.I.P. on board, said nothing. His eyes were closed. He looked very ill. It was even doubtful whether he had heard the things that Kelston had so carefully explained to them all.

Kelston turned and with difficulty, made his way back to the crew compartment.

The air was rougher again. Bates sat, swinging the tuning knob of the radio compass around 294 kilocycles. "Can't get Horta yet, Skipper," he said.

For another half-hour he went on trying. The cloud was still heavy and turbulent. Then suddenly he heard the call-sign of the beacon, FY, just audible above the crackling static. Dit dit da dit. Da dit da da.

The Navigator tried the compass position, but the needle was still being wrenched in all directions by the electricity of the storm.

"Hopeless," he called up to Kelston. "Hopeless, so far."

But gradually, as Easy Zebra plunged on with no visible reassurance that she was progressing a yard, the morse grew louder.

To Bates, listening hard, it seemed almost unbelievable that there *was* anything beyond these clouds, that the world's laws of physics and motion still held good in this grey, limitless universe. As though some unseen hand was disciplining it, the needle on the radio compass started to hunt only about twenty degrees either side of dead ahead.

Seeing its performance, Bates felt more cheerful. " We're getting nearer, Skipper," he said. " Seems just slightly port. Could you alter 5 degrees to the left? "

" I'm following the needle now," Kelston replied, " as far as it'll let me."

Ten minutes later, the pointer steadied. Still slightly left. FY was pounding out now with a much more heartening strength. Suddenly, the needle seemed lost. It turned now one way, now the other, as though trying to make up its mind. Then decisively, it toppled over, and pointed behind them.

" Over it, sir," Bates shouted.

" So I see," Kelston said. " I'm turning on to one-three-five degrees . . . out to sea. Throttles right back."

The engines died down to nothing. " I'll have to put gear and half flap down, Mr. Hawkins. We've got to get down fast and I don't want the speed to build up. Not in this turbulence." The pump whined as it forced the hydraulic fluid into the terrific pressure needed to put the wheels down. When they were locked, Kelston lowered the flaps. Due to their drag effect, only 140 knots showed on the indicator, yet Easy Zebra was approaching the sea at over 4,000 feet a minute.

Had the aircraft been aerodynamically clean at that rate of descent, the speed would have been 100 knots more, and the aircraft's fuselage liable to heavy punishment in the inevitable collisions with the up-currents of the storm. The pressure built up uncomfortably fast, as though they were all in a vertical type of Super-Chief, hurtling downwards instead of horizontally. Bates swallowed hard, trying to clear his ears.

Even at that slow speed, Easy Zebra shook and shuddered as though she had suddenly gone mad. The pilots' panel vibrated like a steel-and-glass jelly, making the erratic readings of the instruments blurred and difficult to follow. The aircraft was plunging deep into the black stomach of the storm; and Felicity retched violently in an effort to dislodge her.

When the altimeter showed 3,000 feet, Kelston eased up on the rate of descent, and put some power on the engines. There was one good thing, anyway, that he had noticed. The air temperature was above freezing at last. The ice over the fuselage had started to melt rapidly.

" How far d'you plan to take her down, Skipper? " Shaughnessy asked.

" Till we see something."

Kelston brought the flaps up. Then he raised the gear. Cautiously now, he felt his way slowly down. The altimeter unwound

past 1,000 feet. The clouds grew straggling and ragged. At 600 feet on the radio altimeter he suddenly saw a mass of white that contrasted sharply with the grey nimbo-stratus now breaking up around them.

It was the sea. Easy Zebra shook herself clear of the cloud, while her crew gazed down in awe at the sight below them. They seemed to be looking down into a cauldron of boiling milk. The wind whipped up the spume and blew it over the frothy surface of the waves like steam.

Easy Zebra was flying in a tiny layer of weeping visibility, sandwiched between the clouds and the sea. Rain still washed over her steel body; but it was possible to see a mile or so all round her. The wipers clanked across the pilots' windscreens.

The turbulence was still bad. Now and again, an up-current hurled the aircraft 500 feet up, blindfolding her once more in the torn hem of the cloud, or a down-draught pushed her lower over the surface of the sea.

Kelston put the minimum possible power on the engines. He brought back the revolutions to 1,500 a minute. The motors started to clank like tin cans, but they would save sixty gallons an hour. Now he could see where he was going, he turned back towards San Miguel island, on a course sent back by Bates of zero-seven-zero degrees.

He said to Draper, " Can you get the ship to transmit, so we can take a bearing? "

" I'll try, Skipper . . . conditions are pretty bad. The tugs can't contact her at all."

For half an hour, they saw nothing but the cloud and the rain and the windswept sea. Kelston's arms were weary, fighting and yielding alternately, as the stick jerked in his hands. Then Bates called up, " This is the area . . . approximately, Skipper."

" What have you got on the radio compass? "

" Santa Anna range."

" Eighty degrees to port. That's about right."

" Do you want a square search? " Bates went on.

" Well, as near square as we can make it in this weather. Best way possible of not missing her."

" I thought of using a visibility of a mile for the legs."

" That'll do," Kelston said.

Easy Zebra started flying on a series of short courses, every minute or so altering course at right angles, as though she was cutting a series of box-shaped Chinese puzzles in the air, with each succeeding box slightly larger than the one it contained.

Kelston stared down at the sea. He was used to this sort of work. For six years in the war, he had been a pilot in Coastal Command, looking for submarines. His trained eyes inspected each huge white mountain of wave, looking for the dark shadow colour of a hull. There was nothing but the grey rain beating endlessly down.

" Haven't you got them to transmit yet, Mr. Draper? "

" I can just hear her now. Very faint. It's only the bit of height we've got that's letting us get her at all. Any chance of going higher, sir? "

" None at all. We're just under the clouds as it is."

Draper said suddenly, " Try the radio compass on 500 kilocycles now, sir."

Kelston turned the tuning-knob on the roof, hunting for the signal. " I can hear her. Not very clear." He switched to the compass position, and watched the needle. It wavered, hesitated, then pointed 30 degrees to the left.

" That may not be accurate, Skipper," Draper said. " He seems to have a very weak transmitter."

" Time to turn," Bates called up. " New course two-six-one degrees."

" Less than an hour's fuel left, sir," Hawkins reminded him.

By no visible indication did Kelston show that he was absorbing the information that kept pouring helpfully on him from all sides. But his mind took it in and correlated it all, while his hands eased the aircraft round in a huge quarter-circle to the left.

He dared not put on too many degrees of bank. The storm was doing its best to turn the Marlborough upside down, without any help from him.

" I suppose they'll be firing rockets, Skipper? " Shaughnessy asked.

" Should be . . . if they've any left."

Feeling ill himself now and thoroughly wretched, Draper muttered into Hawkins's ear, " If the bloody thing had any sense . . . it'd have gone down by now." Then he shouted, " Transmitting again, Skipper. Forty degrees starboard."

Kelston saw the needle on the compass was steadier. " Seems to have got over its fit of the shakes," he said. He waited to see whether it would alter as the aircraft moved away from it. The pointer went rapidly past 90 degrees right, then slowed up, pointing behind them.

" That looks more like it," the Captain said, half to himself. He called back to Bates to find out whether he had obtained a position for the ship from the number of bearings the radio compass had given him.

" Yes, sir," Bates replied. " Should be 8 miles north-east of us now."

" I'm turning back towards her."

For a few seconds after Easy Zebra had wheeled round, the needle pointed dead ahead.

Then it sagged down to the right.

" Damn them . . . damn them! " Draper shouted, " they've stopped transmitting."

Kelston kept on the same course. He was watching the sea keenly. " Must be round here somewhere," he said to Shaughnessy. But he knew that the waves, house-top high, could easily hide a small steamer. The white wash would be continuously

bolting over the ship, forcing her, chameleon-like, to assume its own colour.

Hawkins said suddenly, " Isn't that a rocket, Skipper? "

" Where? "

" Thought I saw one out to starboard." Hawkins pointed out of the First Officer's side window.

Kelston peered across to the right. The excitement on his face died down. There was only a grey curtain of rain there now. " See anything, Mr. Shaughnessy? " he asked.

" I wasn't looking that way, sir."

" What colour? " Kelston asked Hawkins.

" Red, sir."

Kelston put Easy Zebra in a slow turn to the right. His eyes searched the sea on the starboard bow. Suddenly, the folds of the rain clouds parted. The wind seemed to yank at their indefinite edges, as though trying to pull them to pieces.

Just underneath the nose of the aircraft, Kelston caught a glimpse of what looked like a huge horseshoe in the sea, before it disappeared below them.

" That was her stern, all right," he said, and he banked round to the right to have another look. With difficulty, he made out the outlines of a superstructure being pounded by a torrent of water. Then the whole black hull was laid almost flat, silhouetted against the white fury of the waves.

Bates came up to the front to have a look at her. " Lord," he said, with a mixture of horror and pity in his voice, " they're taking a beating. "

Kelston turned to him. " Send her position to Control. Tell them we're circling. And ask them where the tugs are."

" Not much fuel left, Skipper," Hawkins said.

" I've been keeping an eye on the time. Reduce the power on the engines to eighteen inches. I'm going to try and hover just above stalling."

For ten more minutes, Easy Zebra flew slowly round the stricken ship, using less than half the fuel for normal cruising speed. It was difficult to keep her in sight. Kelston kept his eyes steadily on her. Again and again, the *Santa Lucinda* bobbed up, only to be pushed over by another enormous onrush of the sea. It was as though some huge bully was punching the life out of a defenceless, half-drowned child.

Kelston felt the irony of not being able to reach out and help her. All he could do was to keep her company.

But the tugs had got her position now. " They're only 10 miles north, Skipper . . . so Control say," Draper informed him.

" We'll go and see if we can find them," Kelston said, and he turned Easy Zebra towards the north. A few minutes later, he saw them. They were far easier to see than the tramp steamer. Smoke gushed from their funnels like huge brown markers, pinpointing them in their grey-and-white background.

They were ocean-going types, stationed in Ponta Delgada in

case of emergencies to the large Atlantic liners and merchantmen. As to size, they were not far short of the *Santa Lucinda* herself. Kelston dived down low over them and headed Easy Zebra towards the stricken ship. Four times he circled them, diving down each time to give them their heading. They plunged forward slowly in the direction he gave them.

The minutes slipped by. In an hour's time, it would be night. Already the grey light of the storm was turning darker. Hawkins was fidgeting. "Very short of fuel, sir," he said unhappily. They still had, after all, to land at Santa Anna.

Kelston appeared to take no notice. He went over the tugs again, and then, pulling out, he headed the aircraft up towards the north. He looked at his watch. Then, reluctantly, he said, "We'll have to go now."

The tugs were still about 4 miles away from the ship. Bound to find her, he reassured himself. And yet, in this visibility and with darkness coming on, she must be easy enough to miss, more than half hidden by the mountainous waves.

As he moved off, taking a last look at the steamer, he felt that his job was only half done. He knew that when they found her, the tugs would have a devil's game trying to get her in tow, unless the sea abated. He kept on saying to himself, as Easy Zebra flew under the cloud towards San Miguel, they'll be able, anyway, to get the men off her.

Just a couple of miles ahead, they suddenly saw a brown cliff, emerging from the cloud and stretching down to the sea. Then a couple of tiny houses. Kelston turned to the left, parallel with the coast, and followed it round at a height of 800 feet.

"*Not* an orthodox method for approaching an airfield in bad weather," Kelston said to the First Officer. "But in the circumstances . . . the only damn thing we can do."

Shaughnessy contacted the Tower on Channel B of the Very High Frequency voice radio. "Cloud base over the field 900 feet," they told him. "Wind north-easterly, 50 knots, gusting 60. Landing Runway one-three-zero magnetic."

Kelston screwed up his face when he heard it. There would be a heavy cross-wind component on the runway. But he said nothing.

Easy Zebra gradually followed the coastline round to the north shore. The radio compass still pointed at Santa Anna range station, now edging round to the right. Kelston saw the large tump of Rabo de Peixe hill to the left of the runway, its head buried in cloud. He called for the before-landing checks to be made. As the First Officer droned out the sixteen items, Kelston went through his part of the drills automatically.

"Field approach and landing-checks complete, sir," Shaughnessy reported.

Kelston had lined up Easy Zebra pointing in the direction of the hill, on the runway heading of one-three-zero. It was still pelting

with rain. Twilight was beginning to drain all the light from the air. Just over a mile away, they saw the green threshold lights. Very slowly, bumping around in the gusty wind, Easy Zebra approached them, drifting nearly 15 degrees to starboard.

" Seems to be a bit of cross-wind," Shaughnessy said brightly.

Kelston kept the power up until he was flying level with the runway. As the airspeed dropped below 100 knots, he kicked off half the drift with the rudder. Purposely, he had kept the left wing slightly down, to prevent the gale blowing him off the runway. The port wheel crunched down followed a second later by the starboard, this time a little more heavily.

" Nice work, sir," Hawkins said.

As they taxied over to the ramp, Kelston said, " Better get on with the after-landing check, I suppose."

Mr. Dudley, manager for British Empire Airways at Santa Anna airfield, was a very keen chess player. He wasn't just enthusiastic; he was good.

Chess was to Dudley such an obsession that it had become inevitably involved in his everyday dealings with other people. Life, he had found, was not unlike a gigantic chess game. And he played it accordingly. His job was to deal with four airline services a week, two outbound and two homebound. On all four there was a night stop in the Azores of fourteen hours, where the souls on board rested before proceeding, the crew at the Carreras Hotel and the passengers at the Castle.

This night stop was not popular with Dudley. As soon as he saw an aircraft, he was anxious to get rid of it. Marlboroughs, passengers, aircrew—they frequently had him playing innumerable and completely different life-chess games at one and the same time. Dudley was perfectly well aware that the less he saw of any of them, the more chance he had of winning through.

After the passengers had disembarked from Easy Zebra, he was immediately presented with an example of these hazards. A Mr. Parkinson almost literally buttonholed him.

The man's face, which a few minutes before had been pale green, was now red with rage. Dudley heard the words ". . . utter discomfort . . . endangered . . . reckless flying." They were enough to give him the clue he needed. It wasn't his game at all. Mr. Parkinson had the wrong opponent.

" I'll ask the Captain of the aircraft to have a word with you, sir," he said soothingly, and edged over towards Kelston.

When Kelston saw him, he inquired at once, " Have the tugs found her? "

" We haven't heard, Captain . . . but there's one other matter." Dudley indicated the passenger. " Mr. Parkinson. A V.I.P. He's very upset, Captain. Very upset."

" Probably shock," Kelston said. " He'll feel better in the morning."

" I thought perhaps a word from you . . . "

Kelston went over to Mr. Parkinson. He saw that the man had been frightened out of his wits. This violent self-assertion was just the reaction.

" I'm sorry you had such a rough trip, sir," he said.

But the man wasn't going to let himself be smoothed down. Somewhat more intelligible now, he still seemed just on the edge of a nervous collapse. " I shall write . . . Company . . ." he said, ". . . certainly write Chairman . . . old friend. You," and he pointed a finger at Kelston, " not fit . . . aeroplane."

Kelston looked at him in exasperation. Then he saw the man with the pointed beard, who had been the spokesman for the passengers when they were told about the *Santa Lucinda*, was beckoning him to come over to the other side of the ticket counter.

" That's all right, Captain," he said to him behind his hand, " I'll smooth him down."

Kelston said, " Thanks. Looks like being a lifetime's work."

" I am a sailor, Captain. A ship's officer." He looked contemptuously at the rest of Easy Zebra's passengers, still half dazed from their experiences. " They cannot understand."

" Sometimes it's difficult for them," Kelston said, not without sympathy.

Kelston walked down the long corridor on the first floor of the Carreras Hotel. A porter followed, carrying his shabby leather suitcase. At the far end the pilot waited, while the man fumbled with the key. There was a tinkling jangle for a moment. It seemed to fit the lock badly. Then there was a click and Kelston pushed the door open with the flat palm of his hand.

Immediately, the Captain's Room made him welcome. He felt soothed by the quietness which contrasted sharply with the bouncing turbulent air and the everlasting noise of the engines. He seemed suddenly to have entered the small isolated stillness in the heart of a storm.

It had originally been the Bridal Suite. There was a magnificence about it that still managed to preserve a kindly discretion. The high ceiling was supported by Corinthian pilasters wreathed with gold leaf. In the centre a chandelier covered the electric light with a torrent of crystal drops.

Though it was dark outside now, when the sun shone it glittered through large windows, crowned at the top with red and blue diamonds of stained glass; but at the pull of a velvet cord, brocade curtains of an understanding thickness would shut the daylight out. A damasked sofa waited beside a marble fireplace. The mahogany desk pined wordlessly for love-letters.

The painted French wardrobe seemed specially designed to house the silks and satins of a bride's trousseau. Now, it had to be content with a blue serge uniform.

The desk was used mainly for working out fuel figures and endurances. Even the largest Captain was a little inadequate for the soft, voluptuous prairie of the bed.

Kelston felt tired. His arms ached after their continuous wrestling with the controls. Dried sweat and oil had caked his hands with grime. He turned on the taps in the adjoining bathroom, and then, sitting on the bed, he started undressing slowly and mechanically, while he thought about the *Santa Lucinda*.

Now that he was back on the ground, like most other airline pilots, Kelston had a lost look about him which even the kindliness of the room could not quite drive away. Not even his own house where he spent a week out of every three, could be called his home. The nearest thing to it was the inside of a Marlborough. That noisy, confined little kingdom was where normally he felt happiest

When he was not flying, Kelston tended to feel frustrated, conscious of the many things he had not done with his life He had gone into his father's export business, which had been one of the first casualties of the war. He had joined the Air Force, learnt to fly, acquired a certain tight-lipped stoniness on his face, which conveniently walled out his thoughts from other people.

And afterwards, partly because there was nothing else to do, partly because flying was now in his blood, he had joined British Empire Airways.

It was a familiar pattern that he shared with many people, but in his heart he was not satisfied with it. As a kind of sop to an active and intelligent brain that largely lay idle, for his work was mainly routine, he wrote articles on the technical side of flying for several aviation magazines.

When he was fully undressed and his clothes lay in a heap around him, he padded across the carpet to the bathroom in his bare feet and turned off the hot tap.

After he'd scrubbed himself clean, Kelston relaxed in the warm water, feeling its comfortable touches all over his skin. Then with an effort he got out, dried himself, and put on his pyjamas He would have a couple of hours' sleep till dinner-time.

Normally his body was used to misuse. It had to be prepared for long hours on duty without a rest. Even at home, five hours' sleep at night was enough. Round dawn, he would wake and read until everyone else was ready to get up. But this time, the storm had taken more than the usual amount of energy a trip demanded. He was dead tired. He stretched on the bed. Within a few minutes he was asleep.

The room's quiet serenity hung over him as he lay, looking strangely defenceless, his long fingers unaware how tightly they gripped the coverlet over him. The old-fashioned furniture in the room seemed to hold its breath lest it disturb him. But, nevertheless, he slept restlessly. For three hours he always seemed just on the point of waking. Even in unconsciousness, the *Santa Lucinda* was still weighing on his mind

It was past ten when he awoke. That meant he had missed dinner and he swore softly when he looked at his watch. It was still pouring with rain outside He pushed back the bedclothes and

dressed in a grey lounge suit. Going downstairs, he saw the dining-room was locked. Bates was having a drink at the bar.

"Hullo, Skipper. Will you have one?"

"Not yet, thanks. I've missed dinner."

"Have you tried the kitchen?"

"No. They'll probably have gone home by now. It's my own damn fault." He was just about to ask Bates if he had any news of the tramp steamer, when the head waiter came up.

"Captain Kelston. We did not see you at dinner?"

"No."

"This way, then, please." The man pointed towards the dining-room. He was all smiles.

"Don't bother. I'm very late."

"No trouble. No trouble."

Kelston was escorted to the door of the *Sala de Jantar*. The head waiter unlocked it, and the pilot found himself seated at a table, the only guest in the empty dining-room. He was not used to such deferential treatment and wondered vaguely at the reason for it. The head waiter himself served him, helped by two others.

When roast chicken appeared, he was presented with a bottle of Madeira, "with the compliments of the management." Knowing that the Carreras was always on the edge of bankruptcy and therefore practised a not unreasonable parsimoniousness, Kelston wondered still further.

"Mr. Olivarez phoned, asking for you," the head waiter said.

"Olivarez? Who's he?"

"The shipowner. Olivarez owns the *Santa Lucinda*."

"Have you any news of her, then?"

"Of course. The tugs found her. They have her in tow."

Kelston felt an immense relief surge over him. "So she has a good chance?"

"I think so." Then the head waiter added shyly, "I have a brother on board her. Our youngest, Pedro. And he," pointing to the waiter who was filling up Kelston's glass, "he has a cousin on her."

"Quite a family affair."

"We Portuguese," the head waiter said, "we have large families. Nearly everyone in Ponta Delgada has a connection somewhere with the *Santa Lucinda*."

Kelston drank up the glass of Madeira. "That was very nice. Thank you for letting me have it so late," he said.

"You will not forget to telephone Mr. Olivarez, will you, sir?"

"No, I shan't. They'll have his number at the desk?"

"Yes, sir." There was the same deference at the hotel desk. The clerk insisted on getting Olivarez for him. A tired voice said in careful English, "We owe a lot to you, Captain. I was wondering whether you would care to watch her come in?"

"I would very much. When?"

"It depends on the weather. These meteorologists—" Olivarez lapsed into some ferocious Portuguese. "Anyway, they *think* the

centre of the storm will pass over the island in an hour's time. If that is the case, they may be able to bring her in while the wind is for a short time calm. Otherwise . . . "

" Otherwise, I suppose they'll have to wait till the storm is over? "

" No, Captain. Otherwise, it will be too late. The tugs have signalled. She has so much water on board already. No steam, you see. No pumps working."

" I see," Kelston said unhappily. He had thought that as soon as the tugs got her in tow, it would be all over. " Well . . . let's hope the met. men are right."

" Please God. Just this once."

" I'll come down, then."

" I would be glad to meet you, Captain. My office is on 'A' wharf. Tell the police guard I asked you down."

Because there was nothing else to do to keep his mind off the steamer, he put on his coat and set off for the harbour earlier than he intended. As he walked down a steep back street he suddenly noticed that the wind had dropped. Looking up at the sky, he saw a handful of stars shining through big rips in the ragged cloud. His heart leapt inside him.

With a feeling of immense relief, he said aloud, just to make sure it was true, " She's in luck, after all."

The eye of the storm was focusing on Ponta Delgada. Now there would be a brief interval of quietness while the same powerful air wheeled round to the left to attack from behind.

Near the gates of the harbour the crowds began to materialize. Everyone on the island seemed intent on seeing the homecoming of the *Santa Lucinda*. They jostled good-humouredly against each other, swarming over the cobbles, ignoring the horns of the grumbling cars.

Kelston spoke a little Portuguese, learnt during a year hunting submarines from Lagens in the war. The police at the gates were doubtful. They waved their hands to illustrate their problems. There were so many others who wished to get in.

" But Mr. Olivarez," he said, " he asked me to come down."

They still waved. All the others, too, it appeared, had provided the same plausible invitation. He was not employed by the Company? He had no relative aboard? They were friendly but firm.

Then a voice said in English, " Is that Captain Kelston? " Turning round, the pilot saw a man in a white mackintosh standing beside him, hemmed in all round by dark, pushing figures. The arc-lights above them shone down on a plump bald skull edged by a down of white hair.

" Yes. Kelston."

" I am so sorry, Captain. I have been at the wireless station. I did not expect you so soon."

" The weather's improved," Kelston said. " Better now."

" Perhaps." The flat voice sounded cautious, unconvinced. There was a quick burst of Portuguese. The police smiled.

The steel gates opened. " I am Olivarez," the man said when they were through them. Now that there was room, they could shake hands. " I am the man who is so much in your debt."

" The tugs did the job," Kelston said, " I expect they'd have found her without me."

" I do not think so." The shipowner's tone was quite definite. " Not before darkness. She had been blown well out of position." He seemed determined to pin the credit, like a medal, on Kelston's breast. They walked along the edge of the quay. A few feet away, a ribbon of illuminated water lapped contentedly against the stone.

" Anyway," the pilot said uncomfortably, " glad they found her. How far away are they now? "

" Two miles. The lighthouse has sighted them."

" This lull, it won't last long. Can they make it in the time? "

" They are making 4 knots."

Kelston whistled. " That's damned good. Dunno how they manage to tow her at all in that sea."

" They say it's calmer out there now. The swell's not as bad as they expected."

" And if the gale catches them again at the harbour mouth? "

Olivarez shrugged his shoulders. " The tugs could not manœuvre. The best would be to tow her out to sea again. The rocks are too near. They'd save the men. That is the main thing —the men."

They walked on past rusting iron chains, towards the cranes and the sheds. Kelston saw a little knot of people waiting beside a low building, the only one on the quay that was lighted. There were women with black shawls over their heads. The men doffed their caps to Olivarez. The electric lamps on the wharf struggled to keep the surrounding darkness away from them.

Kelston felt the man's nervous unhappiness suddenly increase.

" The families," Olivarez said, jerking his head towards them. " This waiting is the hardest part." Then he added fiercely, " Until she is safely moored here, I will believe nothing. Nothing."

Then he put his arm round Kelston to guide him. " This way, Captain. Mind the steps. My office is to the left."

It was quite dark inside. " The bulb has gone," Olivarez said. " It is a thing I have been meaning to get fixed. One of so many things. But Karena will have coffee ready. I think a cup of coffee . . . " His voice trailed away as though it could not compete with the sound of their steps on the concrete corridor.

They stopped outside a door framed by a thin gold band of light. Olivarez seemed to hesitate before he opened it.

At the end of the room, a girl in a green coat was standing by a table pouring coffee from an urn. Not looking round, she called out, " Carlos, they are so cold outside I am taking coffee down. They know it will be half an hour at least, but they *will* wait outside. They are so anxious to be the first to see her lights."

" Karena," Olivarez said, " this is Captain Kelston."

The girl turned the tap off carefully, and put the cup on the

tray beside the others. Then she turned round. Kelston saw an oval-shaped face, framed by black hair. She was about twenty-eight. Perhaps younger. It was hard to tell. Her skin looked smooth and young. But those smoke-coloured eyes had seen things of which the rest of her body had been blissfully unconscious.

She came towards them and put out her hand a little shyly. " I too wish to say thank you." She spoke the English words too correctly, too carefully, with none of the slurring of over-familiarity. " And now," she said, holding up the tray, " coffee Take this cup. It is a little less cracked than the others."

Kelston took the cup she recommended. Olivarez said, " You see how well she looks after me. Karena is as valuable as one of my ships to me." Then he added, " And far less worry."

" That's only because I don't go to sea."

" Good secretaries sit in offices. You are a good secretary."

They both drank their coffee. Karena went outside to wash their cups, and returned to refill them. " I'll take the tray down to them now."

Kelston said, " Let me take the urn. That would be easier."

She walked lightly and carefully down the corridor in the beam of light from the door, holding the tray high in her hands. Kelston saw the quiet grace of her slight body, her small, well-shaped head, her short hair glowing softly in the brief light, before she gradually merged into the darkness at the end of the corridor.

She swung the door open. " Four steps," she called back. " Can you see all right? "

" Fine."

He put the urn down. The families crowded up, and she called out quickly, " No more news yet. Just some coffee for you."

Kelston filled the cups while she handed them round. The same cups came back and were refilled and refilled. " Not very hygienic, I suppose," she laughed. Her face was close to his, as she held a cup under the tap. " But no one minds. Not tonight."

She mingled with the crowd, sympathizing, encouraging, smiling. She knew all their names, and like theirs, her eyes wandered continuously to the wide black emptiness beyond the harbour wall. When she was no longer beside him, he felt like a stranger intruding on a family trouble, and he went back inside.

" Karena is talking to them," he said, as he closed the office door.

Olivarez was gazing out of the window that faced south towards the harbour mouth. " I should be there, too," he said, " but I am as fearful as they are. No use at words of comfort. Karena will say them for me."

Suddenly he stared hard at Kelston. " Listen," he muttered, " wasn't that the wind on the window? "

" I can't hear anything."

" I thought for a moment it was the wind."

The shipowner looked at his watch. " Just a little longer," he said to it, as though begging a favour. His head nodded, counting the seconds. " One seems so powerless."

Everything outside was still quite quiet. The minutes dragged by. Every now and then Olivarez said, " If only they'd hurry! "

Suddenly there was a slight whispering. At first, it sounded so like the wind that Olivarez's eyes widened in fear.

Then there was a shout. A huge cry of joy. The invisible mountains round the bay echoed it back, increasing the strength of its gladness. The noise careered into the sky. A little group of flimsy human beings were defiantly roaring out in triumph at their victory over Felicity.

Kelston peered over Olivarez's shoulder. Out in the blackness of the harbour mouth a cluster of red, green, and white lights glowed together like a little coloured constellation.

" They're in," Olivarez said breathlessly.

A searchlight on the end of the quay picked out the *Santa Lucinda*. Her broken foremast hung down over her bows. She was listing to port as though hunched up in pain. The tugs were gushing great clouds of smoke from their funnels. Now they were so near they seemed to be pulling at her harder. The *Santa Lucinda* bobbed up and down in an effort to do her best for them.

They dashed down the corridor. The crowd had now swarmed to the brink of the water. Karena threw her arms round Olivarez. " See, Carlos. They are all right now." Then she turned to Kelston and smiled. " Safe home again."

" You know everyone on board? "

" Everyone."

They stood side by side, while Olivarez now chattered with the families, gesticulating and happy. The steamer grew bigger. They could see men on her decks waving their hands above their heads. Ropes were flung out to her from the bollards.

Kelston said, " She's not too badly knocked about."

The girl kept silent. Glancing down at her, he saw the tears on her face. A little embarrassed, he turned away. But for a fraction of a second, their eyes had met.

He looked at the muddy pools round their shoes. It was suddenly important that he should let her know that he wasn't being tactful or polite or unfeeling. He reached out into the darkness and took her hand. Her fingers felt icy-cold.

There seemed no point in saying anything. He felt he had, after all, made himself understood. The wind had started again The rain was beginning to bang at the tin roofs of the warehouses. With their wet hands clasped together, they watched the *Santa Lucinda* bump gently against the rubber tyres that were strung along the end of the granite quay.

★ ★ ★

A LEAN TIME

As the Leaning Tower said to Big Ben, " If you have the time, I have the inclination."

AIR ON A G-STRING

BY CORDELIA BAIRD GROSS

WHEN I first met Pansy St. Clare, she was young and beautiful and she had, as her mother said, the loveliest navel in the five boroughs. Since I could never have been placed third even in Staten Island, I naturally felt that Pansy had everything.

I had got a job, right after finishing college, as a part-time secretary at The Tonic, a night club in New York, and Pansy was the strip-tease artiste there. But I hadn't been at the club a week before I saw that although her costumes were real creations, her heart wasn't in her work.

She wasn't the least bit lazy. She'd put 'em on and take 'em off, put 'em on and take 'em off, and never complain, even when a north wind blew up and the stage got pretty draughty.

She wasn't self-conscious, either. Every night at the end of her act, she'd take her time about finding her robe. If the lights went on before she'd located it, she didn't pretend to be embarrassed. All she wanted were her big, horn-rimmed glasses, for she was so near-sighted she was almost blind without them.

She was amiable even about her glasses and never held a grudge. One night the page boy carried them to the kitchen by mistake. Pansy didn't scream or fling a tantrum. She had been too well brought up. She just stood there, bare and blinking and beautiful in the sudden light, until finally a waiter grabbed up a tablecloth and threw it around her.

Yet for all Pansy's sweetness and despite her many blessings, I felt more sure every time I saw her that she was either deeply frustrated or was going down with sleeping-sickness.

I asked Homer Chiddy, the piano-player, about her. Homer was from Montana and since I'd just come, green as the grass, from Texas, this made a bond between us.

"You've seen her mother?" asked Homer. I nodded.

"An iron woman," Homer said. "She wants Pansy to marry a millionaire."

"What does Pansy want?"

"She wants to cook," explained Homer. "From birth she's

trouped in burlesque with her mother. She's eaten in a thousand cheap cafés. She's warmed up ten thousand meals on an electric hotplate. She dreams of soufflés, lighter than her feathers. And pies and cakes her Ma could never bake." Sometimes Homer's classic name sort of carried him away " She'll be eighteen next month," he said, " and for her birthday, she's got her heart set on a big white stove with two great ovens."

" Can't she get it? " I asked.

" Not while her mother lives," said Homer, " and I'll bet she's here to stay." This made me even fonder of Pansy.

I could almost see the tug of war going on between mother and daughter. Some nights Pansy seemed a little more animated and I felt she was winning. She'd come into the office between shows and bring her scrapbook of recipes for me to admire, or she'd go into the kitchen, and Leon, the head chef, would let her stir the onion soup or decorate a shrimp.

Other nights she was the picture of defeat and would just slump down at her dressing-table and not speak to anyone.

" I'm waiting for her to yawn in our faces and then go to her final rest," said Tony, one of the owners. He was too tender-hearted to fire anyone; so I wasn't really worried for Pansy.

About two weeks later Pansy came up to Homer and me.

" Hey, kids," she said in her throaty whisky-voice, which was always surprising, since she drank only lemonade. " Can ya come up t' my place tomorra afternoon? I'm a Libra in the ascendant. Tomorra's my birthday."

We accepted with pleasure. " She seemed happy," I said when Pansy had left us. " You think she's getting the stove? "

" Naw," said Homer, " and she lives in Canarsie's nethermost night. We'll need five Indians and a guide to find it."

At four the next afternoon we arrived at the boarding-house where the St. Clares lived. Pansy opened the door for us and even through her glasses I could see she'd been crying.

" Happy birthday," we said and stepped into the bed-sitting-room. It was more fully clothed than Pansy at the beginning of her act. Ruffled skirts concealed every table-leg. Lampshades dripped with ribbons and beads. Dolls in satin and gold lace hid the wide surface of the bed. Pansy was compensated at home for the bare simplicity of her art.

" Welcome, folks," said Mrs. St. Clare. " Pleased to see you."

Homer gave Pansy some flowers we'd brought, but they looked mighty feeble against the competition they met. The room was gay with enormous branches and buds and leaves and blossoms, too brilliant to be true. " From my act when I left

burlycue," explained Mrs. St. Clare, crawling beneath a flowering peach tree in the corner to dig out an extra vase.

" Sit down, kids," said Pansy. " Rest yourselves."

Mrs. St. Clare was a gracious hostess. " I put you down as a Capricorn, Mr. Chiddy," she said. " They're so powerful."

" Right," said Homer.

" My little girl has told me how wunnerful you are to her. She's an artist to her toe-nails and she senses everything."

" Right," said Homer.

" She's got a great future with me to guide her," said Mrs. St. Clare, never taking her eyes off Pansy.

" Gee, Mom," said Pansy, squirming at the prophecy.

" I started her stripping the year after her voice had changed," explained Mrs. St. Clare, " and now she's gotta ú-nique act. It's nothing out of the ordinary."

" Right," said Homer.

" I'm giving her some gorgeous, expensive white doves for her act," continued Mrs. St. Clare. Then a bitter note entered her voice as she added, " But I'm afraid she'll want to cook 'em."

" Gee, Mom," cried Pansy, " just 'cause I wanna stove."

" It ain't that I don't trust ya, Pansy," said her mother kindly. " I jus' got no confidence in ya."

The afternoon flew by. Finally Pansy said, " Tell the kids some dirty stories, Mom, while I fix the sandwiches."

Mom obliged. The sandwiches were delicious. Pansy had made them in the bathroom, for she had no kitchen.

As we started to leave, Mrs. St. Clare said, " You folks know the way now. The key's always under the mat."

" Right," said Homer.

" Take good care of my little girl, Mr. Chiddy," Mrs. St. Clare yelled after us. " And be sure to make the orchestra take plenty of time for her tease."

Pansy and Homer and I started walking to the subway.

In an empty store window was an announcement of a coming attraction. The local branch of the Eastern Star was holding a bazaar and a box supper. Prizes would be awarded for the most handsome apple pies.

" My stove! " cried Pansy, stopping suddenly and pointing to the display. " Lookit that gorgeous stove they're giving away."

" It's got only one oven, Pansy honey," I said, hoping to lighten her loss, but I had to admit to myself that the stove was nearly perfect. Pinned to the oven door, a blue ribbon garnished with pearls proclaimed it to be the first prize and showed what could be won if a girl put her mind to it.

" Gee," said Pansy, and her throaty voice quivered, " thinka

baking such a swell pie you'd win that stove and the blue ribbon."

Tony met us at the door of the club. "She get the stove?" he whispered to me. "I thought I saw her pulse flutter."

"She's getting doves," I said.

Life went on, but there was a subtle change in Pansy. She'd often hung around the club kitchen and everyone there liked her. Leon, the head chef, was a particular friend, and when not too busy, he always watched her performance. Now she made the kitchen her second home.

She no longer played three-handed solitaire with Homer and me. When we asked her a question, her answers were vague or irrelevant. She'd always looked dreamy, but she'd never heard voices before. We were deeply concerned.

One afternoon, a few weeks after the birthday party, I arrived at the club and saw Leon talking excitedly to Homer.

"Leon says Pansy's ill," Homer told me.

"She's a sick girl, all right," said Leon. "She may not be in tonight."

"How do you know?" I asked. "Did she telephone?"

"She was in round noon," Leon explained. "She's an ambitious girl, y' know. Been coming in early every day the las' two, three weeks."

"Good lord, why?" asked Homer.

"Practising," said Leon. "Rehearsing. Picks things up fast. Why, today we worked—I mean—*she* worked two hours as hard as she could." He blushed, and Homer and I looked at each other in amazement. "Then she got pains," Leon continued quickly. "The poor kid *hadda* go home."

"She's a Libra," suggested Homer, "maybe it's her lucky day to lay in bed."

"Don't talk that way in front of Baby here," said Tony who had come up to greet me. My B.A. degree always uplifted him, but he thought Texas University, my Alma Mater, was a sort of convent and he must keep on sheltering me.

"Well, Baby," replied Homer, bowing low to me, "if Pansy don't show, perhaps you'll oblige."

"Over my dead body," retorted Tony piously. "I'd as soon push my mother on."

Everyone in The Tonic spoke of Pansy and wondered how she was. "Send anything but flowers," said Homer.

Twenty minutes before Pansy was due to do her show, she came running into the club. She wasn't wearing make-up, but her cheeks were delicately pink. Her eyes, usually gentle and misty behind her glasses, sparkled like her sequined garter-belt.

" You kids be sure an' catch my act tonight, will ya? " she panted breathlessly. " And promise you'll get Leon too. I got no time to explain, but he's gotta see this show."

We promised and Homer went right away to find Leon.

The lights were dimmed. The orchestra played softly. Pansy made her entrance. " That's my girl! " cried Leon.

" My God," exclaimed Tony, " she's alive! "

She was indeed. She was bursting with radiant self-confidence. She was glowing with creative fire. Every movement was the poem her mother'd dreamt of. Each garment whispered silkily to the floor.

And then as the lights shimmered a little brighter for the climax, Pansy flung off her last remaining vestment. For a moment she stood poised, happy and triumphant. Then the lights went out.

But not before we had seen, pinned onto Pansy's glittering G-string, the jewelled blue ribbon of the Eastern Star.

GARDEN PLEASURES

All the delights, which in these gardens grow

ABRAHAM COWLEY

In the other gardens
And all up the vale,
From the autumn bonfires
See the smoke trail!

Pleasant summer over
And all the summer flowers,
The red fire blazes,
The grey smoke towers.

Sing a song of seasons!
Something bright in all!
Flowers in the summer,
Fires in the fall!

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, *Autumn Fires*

Grounds for Complaint

In the feeldes and suburbes of the cities they haue gardens, and least they might bee espied in these open places, they haue their banquetting houses with galleries, turettes, and what not els therein sumpteously erected: wherein they may (and doubtlesse doe) many of them play the filthie persons. And for that their gardens are locked, some of them haue three or foure keyes a peece, whereof one they keepe for themselues, the other their paramours haue to goe in before them, least happely they might be perceiued. Then to these gardens they repaire where they meeting their sweete heartes, receiue their wished desires. If they can speake with their dearlinges no where els, yet there they may bee sure to meete them, and to receiue the guerdon of their paines—they knowe what I meane.

PHILIP STUBBES, *The Anatomie of Abuses*

Nip in the Air

Uneasily, the vegetables crouch down
Among their leaves at sunset; on the tree
The anxious fruit hangs, waiting heavily
Baskets that do not come. Prescience of brown
Afflicts the flowers; though bravely they have tossed
Their heads at hint of change within the air,
They welcome scissors snipping them to spare
Their blaze for rooms out of the reach of frost . . .

HELEN HARRINGTON,
Night Before Frost

Perennial Delights

" What flowers did the Empress like the best? " I asked.

" It's difficult to say what she liked the best. She wanted me to grow all the flowers and blossoms that figure on pictures and scrolls. She had very unusual taste in flowers. She never could bear the curled or trained flowers that we see in the market. So I had to grow all the flowers in our gardens and our own greenhouse."

" Did she like these little rock gardens? " I asked again.

" Oh, she loved them! " said Uncle Li. " I think she grew up in the country, so she was very fond of nature. She ordered landscape gardening round the Summer Palace. She often taught me how to arrange miniature rock gardens. I had to grow many dwarf pines, willows, and evergreen trees to go with all sorts of flowers in pots. I searched for odd-looking picturesque old branches to graft on plums, cherries, or peaches to be planted in pots and rock gardens."

" I heard that you grew tiny peony and camelia flowers in your rock gardens," said I. " How long could you keep them? My father had one, but it did not last long."

" This is a good question. Let us go back to what I meant to

tell you just now. You see, the Empress was very fond of rock gardens with picturesque little trees. She could not bear to see any of her favourite flowers or plants die out. So she used to say to me: 'You know, trees and flowers always become more charming when they are old. If you treat them well they will never die.' "

" But some miniature trees cannot live very long," said Lao Chou.

" I dared not say this to Her Majesty. This is why I had to spend my salary in trying many fantastic ways of keeping her flowers and trees alive. Once I was worried about an old tree peony that was one of her favourites, which I replanted in a shallow pot. I found its root beginning to rot. Then I tried many methods of keeping it from dying, but in vain. Finally an old gardener told me to wash the roots with sesame oil. It was cured and did very well."

" How extravagant! We never use more than a spoonful when we are cooking."

" But it is always a real thrill for us to see fresh new flowers on an old branch," continued Uncle Li. " I am going to treat my three-hundred-year-old lilac with this expensive oil. You see, money works wonders when you know how to use it."

On our way home Lao Chou said to me: " Uncle Li is not only a remarkable gardener, he is in love with his garden."

SU HUA, *Ancient Melodies*

Water Nymph

I saw you first on a summer afternoon
Watering the lawn with a hose and a glittering jet
Of falling crystals, shining in the sun.

On the shaded grass, drenched and soaking wet,
Neighbours might pass, and you would answer their call
With a constant voice.
With that same voice I heard
You scold three puppies for romping too much with a ball
Or yapping under a locust tree at a bird.

Then Autumn descended out of her chariot of bronze
(Spring in her silver, Summer in her gold one had left)
And found your asters unready, with rusted crowns,
And the puppies all half-grown dogs, and you bereft
Of your olden voice, raking the fallen leaves
And snipping the moon-flower vines that had grown to the eaves.

MERRILL MOORE, *I Saw You First*

THE CHRYSALIDS

BY JOHN WYNDHAM

☆

As a boy, David Strorm had made a very exciting discovery—he was able to send thoughts and thought-pictures to Rosalind and some of his friends, and receive a thought-reply flashed back instantly from wherever they might be. Soon he found that Petra, his six-year-old sister, possessed this extraordinary thought-power in a shattering degree.

Suspicion must be avoided at all costs. Death or banishment to the Fringes would await each of them if their new power was even guessed at. David's father was a stern destroyer of the abnormal forms of life that had come into being after the Tribulation of the atomic age. Children, cattle, and crops that did not conform to their true natural image were done away with. For Petra and the others, their new abnormal telepathic power was fraught with danger . . as they were soon to realize

In acute distress at an attack on her pony, Petra had flashed out a blinding thought-summons to them all, compelling them to go at once to the woods to her help—where a strange horseman bears down suspiciously to question David . . .

And now begin the Second (and last) Part of this intriguing new sf story by the brilliant author of "The Day of the Triffids." It is to be published as a full-length novel by Michael Joseph.

☆

A LARGE man on a bay mare thrust out of the trees into the glade. He reined in and sat looking at us.

"What's going on here?" he asked suspiciously.

I explained that my sister Petra's pony had been attacked, and that we had answered her calls for help. He did not take that at its face value. He looked sharply at Sally and Katherine, the two girls who had just galloped up and were staring incredulously at Petra.

"Well, you two didn't come here for that," he said.

"But we did," one of them told him.

He stared at them. "I was right behind you, and I heard no calls," he said.

Sally and Katherine looked confusedly at one another. "But we did," Sally told him again.

"Everybody for miles must have heard it," I told him. "There was the pony screaming, too."

I led him round the clump of bushes, and showed him the savaged pony and the dead creature. It seemed as if he hadn't expected that evidence, but he wasn't altogether appeased. He demanded to know who we all were. We told him, and showed our identity tags. Luckily, Michael had already ridden off.

"You don't look as if you're from the Fringes," he admitted grudgingly.

"Of course we aren't. Why should we be?"

He surveyed us all again, frowning. "You didn't know the Fringes have got spies out?" he asked.

"No," we told him.

He still wasn't satisfied. "I'd say it's a good half-hour since that pony did any screaming," he said, turning to Sally and Katherine. "How did you two manage to come straight to this spot?"

Sally opened her eyes surprisedly. "This was the direction it came from, and then when we got nearer we heard the little girl crying," she told him.

"It was very good of you to follow it up," I put in, "but it's all over now, and luckily she wasn't hurt. We'd better get her home, and thank you both for coming to help." They took that up all right. They congratulated us on Petra's escape, hoped she would get over the fright quickly, and rode off.

The man hesitated, still looking puzzled. Finally, he gave the three of us a long, searching stare, and then rode off in the wake of the other two.

We watched him disappear among the trees. "Who is he?" asked Rosalind uneasily.

I could not tell her. He was not a man I had ever seen before, nor had our names seemed to mean much to him. Automatically I started to put the question to Sally in a thought-picture, only to come up against the barrier of distress that Petra was still making. It gave one a strange, muffled feeling to be cut off from the rest like that. Rosalind started walking her horse homeward, still trying to calm Petra down. I collected the dead pony's saddle and bridle, and the arrows out of the creature, and then followed them.

During the evening the disturbance fluctuated from time to time; then, at last, it diminished quite steeply and disappeared.

"Thank goodness for that! She's asleep at last," came from one of the others.

"Who was the man?" Rosalind and I asked, simultaneously and anxiously.

It was Sally who answered, "He's fairly new here. My father knows him. He has a farm a bit less than halfway to Kentak. It

was just bad luck his seeing us; and of course he wondered why we were going at a gallop. He seemed very suspicious."

"Why?" asked Rosalind. "Does he know anything about thought-shapes? I didn't think any of them had the slightest suspicion . . ."

"I don't know," Sally said. "But he can't make them himself, or receive them. I tried him hard."

Michael's distinctive pattern came in, inquiring what it was all about. We explained. He told us, "They have an idea that there may be something of the kind—but only a very rough idea—a sort of emotional transference of thought. They call it telepathy—at least, those who believe in it do, though they aren't all sure that it even exists."

"Do they think it's deviational?" I asked.

"It's difficult to say. I'm not sure that the question has ever been put bluntly. Academically, though, there is the point that since God is able to read men's minds, the true image ought to be able to do the same. It could be argued that it is a power that men have temporarily lost as a punishment, part of Tribulation. If that's what he thinks, we'd all have quite a case."

"What about the rest?" Rosalind asked. "Does anybody seem suspicious?"

She got four noes to that.

"Good. Then you four are out of it; the rest of us will have to be wary. David must talk to Petra in words, and try to teach her some control of her thought-power. If this distress of hers occurs again you must all ignore it, and leave it to David and me. If it is compulsive, the way it was the first time, and compels us to go to her, whoever reaches her first will have to try to make her unconscious, and the moment the compulsion breaks, you must turn back and do your best to cover up. Whatever happens, we must see that we aren't drawn together into a group again. It is very dangerous and certain to cause suspicion. Does everybody understand and agree?"

Their assents came in. Then the rest of them withdrew, leaving Rosalind and me to discuss how best I could tackle Petra.

I woke early the next morning, and the cause of my waking was Petra's renewed distress over the loss of her pony. Luckily, it did not have anything like the intensity of the previous day. I tried to make contact with her, and though she did not understand, there was a perceptible check for some seconds. I got up and went along to her room. She was glad to see me, and the distress-pattern eased off a lot while we chatted. Before I left, I promised to take her fishing that afternoon.

It is not easy to explain in words how to make intelligible thought-shapes. All of us had found out for ourselves; at first fumblingly, but gradually we developed greater power as we discovered and learnt from one another. With Petra it was different: already at six years old, she had a strength of projection that was overwhelming in its effect, and she had no idea how to control it.

I did my best, but at her age there was the difficulty that the words had to be simple, too. After an hour I had made very little headway, and she was becoming too bored to try to understand.

" All right," I said, despairingly. " Let's play a game. You shut your eyes. Keep them shut, and pretend you're looking down a deep, deep well. Nothing but dark. Don't think of anything but how dark it is, and how far, far away the bottom of the well is."

" Yes," she agreed, eyelids tightly clenched.

I thought a rabbit for her, and made it twitch its nose. She chuckled. Well, that was one good thing; at least, she could *receive*. I thought a puppy, some chickens, and a horse and cart, in quick succession. She opened her eyes, and looked bewildered.

" Where are they? " she asked, looking round for them.

" They were think-things," I told her. " Now I'll shut my eyes, too. We'll both look down the dark well and think of nothing but how dark it is. Then you make a picture of a think-thing at the bottom of the well so that I can see it."

I played my part conscientiously and opened my mind to its most sensitive. That was a mistake: there was a flash and a glare and a general feeling that I had been struck by a thunderbolt. I staggered in a mental daze, with no idea what her picture had been.

The others came in, protesting. I tried to explain.

" Well, you be careful. Don't let her do that again. I damn near put an axe through my foot," came aggrievedly from Michael.

" I've scalded myself on the kettle," from Katherine.

" Lull her. Soothe her down somehow," advised Rosalind. " And warn us next time, *before* she tries."

When I had pulled myself together: " Make," I told Petra, " make a little think-picture this time, a really little one ever so far away, in soft pretty colours, and do it slowly and gently, as if you were making it out of cobwebs."

Petra nodded, and closed her eyes again.

" Look out! " I warned the others, and waited, wishing it were the kind of thing one could dodge.

It was not much worse than a minor explosion this time. I was even able to catch the shape of it.

" A fish! " I told her, " a fish with a droopy tail."

She chuckled delightedly.

" Undoubtedly a fish," came from Michael. " You're doing fine. All you want now is to get her down to about one per cent of that power before she burns our brains out."

The next afternoon we had another session. It was a rather violent and exhausting business, but Petra was beginning to get some idea of forming thought-shapes. The main trouble was to keep the power down: when she became excited one was almost stunned by the impact. The others complained they could get no work done while it went on; it was like trying to ignore sudden hammer-bangs inside one's head. Towards the end I said to Petra, " Now I'm going to tell Rosalind to send you a think-picture. Shut your eyes like before. Ready? "

"Rosalind? Where is she?" Petra asked, looking round.

"That doesn't matter with think-pictures. Now just look at the dark, and think of nothing."

"And you others," I added for the benefit of the rest, "lay off, will you? Keep it all clear for Rosalind, and don't interrupt."

We sat silent and receptive . . .

Rosalind made a pond, with reeds round it. She filled it with ducks, friendly, humorous-looking ducks of all colours. One chunky, earnestly trying duck was always a little late and a little wrong. Petra loved it, she chuckled delightedly. Then suddenly she projected her delight, wiped out the whole thing, and dazed us all again. It was wearing, but there was progress.

In the fourth lesson she learnt the trick of clearing her mind without closing her eyes. By the end of the week we were really getting on. Her thought-shapes were crude and unstable, but would improve with practice; her reception of simple forms was good, though as yet she could catch little of our projections to one another.

"Too difficult and too quick," she said. "I can tell if it is you, or Rosalind, or one of the others doing it, but it goes so fast it all gets muddled. The other ones are much *more* muddled, though."

"What other ones—Sally, or Michael?" I asked.

"No. The other other ones. The long-way-away ones," she said impatiently.

I decided to take it calmly. "I don't think I know them. Who are they?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she said. "They're over there somewhere." She pointed to the south-west.

I thought that over for a moment. "Suppose you try to show me what they show you," I suggested.

She tried. There was something there; something which I had never received before, and which certainly did not come from any of us. It was quite blurry, perhaps because Petra was trying to relay something she did not understand herself. I could make nothing of it, and called Rosalind in. She found it no clearer than I had so we let it rest for a time.

At supper, some ten days after the loss of Petra's pony, Uncle Axel asked me to come and give him a hand with truing up a wheel while there was still light. Superficially the request was casual enough, but there was something in his eye that made me agree without hesitation. I joined him and we went over behind the rick where we should neither be seen nor overheard. He put a straw between his teeth, and looked at me seriously.

"You been careless, Davie boy?" he asked.

"I don't think so," I told him.

"One of the rest of you, maybe?" he suggested.

Again, I didn't think so.

"H'm," he said. "Then why, would you say, has Joe Darley been asking questions about you?"

"Just me—or the others as well?" I asked.

" You—and Rosalind Morton."

" Oh," I said uneasily. " Still, if it's only Joe Darley . . ."

" Joe," said my Uncle Axel, " Joe is a fellow that the Inspector has used before now, when he wants a few inquiries made without showing himself. I don't like it."

I did not care for it, either. However, I had managed to find out that we did not come within the Inspector's categories of Scheduled Deviations. I told him so, but he shook his head.

" Those lists are not exhaustive," he said. " You can't regulate for the million things that *may* happen. You've got to have test cases for new ones when they crop up."

" I've been thinking it over," I said. " They can't be clear what they're looking for. If there's any question, all we have to do is act bewildered, just as a norm would."

He didn't seem reassured by that.

" They'd not bring a charge at all if they weren't pretty damn sure," he said. " The Inspector wouldn't put himself in a weak spot with your father and Angus Morton How do you reckon it could have started, anyway? "

I did not know for sure. The affair of Petra's pony seemed the most likely point, but I didn't want to tell him about that; it would have involved telling him about Petra herself, too. We had a tacit understanding that the less he knew, the less he'd have to hide.

We all conferred that night: not very satisfactorily. As Michael put it, " If you and Rosalind are quite certain that there's been nothing to start suspicion at your end, then it's very likely traceable to that man in the forest. What's his name, Sally? "

Knowing the thought-shape of him so well, we hadn't bothered about his name before. Sally spelt it out in letter-forms, " John Rawley."

" Well, if he's the source, he must have notified the Inspector of this district, and it will have been handed on to your Inspector. That'll mean that half a dozen or more people are wondering about it already, and there'll be questions going on here about Sally and Katherine. The devil of it is that everybody's twice as suspicious as usual because they're all panicked about trouble from the Fringes. I'll find out what I can tomorrow, and let you know."

" But what is it best to do? " Rosalind put in, worriedly.

" Nothing, for the moment," Michael said, " if we are right about the source. I'm still all right as he didn't see me. The rest of you are in two groups: Sally and Katherine; Rosalind, David, and Petra.

" Petra's the weak spot; she's too young to understand. If they start on her and trick her and trap her, it might end up in sterilization and the Fringes for all of us. That makes her the key point. They must not get hold of her. There may be no suspicion attaching to her yet—but she was there when the man Rawley saw you, so she is suspect. They must not be allowed to start on her, or they'll have it out of her somehow.

" This is where we'll depend on you, David. Your job is to

see that she is not taken for questioning If you have to kill someone to prevent it, then you must. Remember, if they do move at all, it will be to exterminate us—by the slow method, if not by the fast.

" If you can't save Petra, then you must kill her. It will be more merciful than sterilization and banishment to the Fringes."

Their agreements came in.

Michael went on, " It might be best if the four of you, with Petra, made arrangements to run for it, if necessary."

He went on to explain in more detail. The overall plan was, I think, quite reasonable . . . Unfortunately, we had no means of knowing that events were already overtaking us

I went as far as to make some preparations before going to bed that night—at least, I put a bow and fifty arrows handy, also a sack with several loaves of bread and a cheese in it—I was still thinking of all sorts of desirable additions I would make next day when I fell asleep.

No more than a couple of hours could have passed before I was awakened by a small sound. There was no moon, but enough starlight came in to show a small white-nightgowned figure by the door. " David," she said, " Rosalind . . ."

But she did not need to tell me. Rosalind's thoughts had broken in already. " David," she urged me. " You must come at once. They've taken Sally and Katherine."

Michael crowded in. " Hurry, you two. It was a deliberate surprise. If they know anything much they'll have timed it to send a party for you too. Best be on the safe side and get out."

" Meet below the mill. Hurry," Rosalind added.

" Get dressed as fast as you can. Overalls. And be very quiet," I told Petra, in words.

Possibly she had not understood our thought-shapes in detail, but she had caught their urgency. She nodded and slipped back into the dark passage.

I pulled on my clothes as fast as I could, and rolled my blankets into a bundle. Groping in the shadows, I found the bow and the arrows and the bag of food, and made for the door. Petra was nearly dressed already. I grabbed an armful of clothes from her cupboard, and rolled them up in the blankets.

" Don't put on your shoes yet. Come on, tiptoe like a cat," I told her.

Outside the yard door I laid down the bundle and the sack, and we both put our shoes on. Petra started to speak, but I put my finger on my lips, and gave her a thought-shape of Rachel, the black mare. She nodded. I just had the stable door open when I caught a distant sound, and paused to listen.

" Horses," said Petra. Horses it was. Several sets of hoofs, and the jangle of bits.

There was no time to find the saddle and bridle for Rachel. We brought her out on the halter, and mounted from the block.

With all I was carrying, there was no room for Petra in front of me. She got up behind, and hung on round my waist. Then, quietly, we slipped out of the yard and down the path to the river bank while the hoofbeats on the upper track drew nearer to the house.

" Are you away? " I asked Rosalind, and let her know what was happening with us.

" I was away ten minutes ago. I had everything ready," she told me with reproof. " We'd all been trying to reach you for more than half an hour. Luckily Petra happened to wake up."

Petra caught her own thought-shape, and broke in excitedly to know what was happening. It was like a fountain of sparks.

" Gently, darling. Much more gently," protested Rosalind. " We'll tell you all about it soon." She paused to get over the blinding effect, then, " Sally . . .? Katherine . . .? " she asked.

They responded together. " We're being taken to the Inspector's. We're all innocent and bewildered. Is that best? "

Michael and Rosalind agreed that it was.

" We think," Sally went on, " that we ought to shut our minds. It will make it easier for us to act as normals if we don't know what is happening to you. So don't try to reach us, any of you."

" Very well—but we shall be open for you," Rosalind told her. She diverted to me. " Come along, David. There are lights up at the farm now."

" It's all right. We're coming," I told her. " It'll take them some time in the dark to find which way we've gone."

" They'll know by the stable warmth that you can't have got far yet." I looked back. Up by the house I could see a lantern swinging in someone's hand. We had reached the river bank now, and it was safe to urge Rachel into a trot. We kept that up until we came to the ford, and then for another half-mile until we were close by the mill. It seemed prudent to walk her past that, in case anyone should happen to be awake. Presently I caught Rosalind's feeling of relief coming from somewhere straight ahead.

We trotted again, and in a few moments I noticed a movement in the shadow of the trees to the left of the track. I turned the mare that way, and found Rosalind waiting—and not only Rosalind, but her father's pair of greathorses, that had caused trouble between the Inspector and my father, who had failed in his attempts to condemn them as monstrous deviations. Both the huge creatures were saddled and wearing pannier baskets. Rosalind sat in one of the baskets, waiting, her bow laid across it, ready to hand.

I helped Petra down, and then slid off the mare myself with my armful of gear. Rosalind leaned out of the basket and peered down to see what I had.

" Throw the blankets up here," she directed. " What's in the sack? " I told her. " Is that all? " she said disapprovingly.

She arranged the blankets to pad the saddle-board between the panniers. I hoisted Petra as high as I could. Rosalind leaned down and managed to reach her hand. With a heave from both ofie us, Petra scrambled up and perched herself on the blankets.

"You, too," Rosalind directed. "We'd better keep together. There's room in the other pannier." She flipped over a kind of miniature rope-ladder so that it hung down the greathorse's left shoulder.

I turned the mare's head for home, and gave her a smack on the flank to start her off. After I had handed up the rest of the things I scrambled into the other pannier. The moment my foot was clear of the mounting-rungs Rosalind pulled them up and hitched them.

She gave the reins a shake, and before I was well settled in the pannier we were off, with the led horse following.

We trotted awhile, and then left the track for a stream. Where that was joined by another we branched up the lesser one. We left that and picked our way across boggy ground to another stream. We went down that a little, and turned onto another lot of marshy ground, which gradually became firmer until the hoofs were clinking against stones. We slowed still more as the greathorse picked its way among rocks. Evidently Rosalind had been doing some careful planning.

I must have projected that thought, for she came in with, "It's a pity that you didn't think more and sleep less."

"I made a start," I protested. "I was going to get everything fixed today. It didn't seem so urgent."

"So when I tried to consult you, you'd gone to sleep. My mother and I spent two solid hours packing these panniers and getting the saddles slung up ready for an emergency, while all you did was sleep."

"Your mother?" I asked, startled, "does she *know*?"

"She's known, or guessed something, for a long time. I don't know how much. Somehow I knew that she'd made up her mind to help me when the time came, and she did."

I thought that over. It made one wonder whether there might not be many mothers turning a blind eye to anything that did not actually infringe the definitions—and perhaps to things that did, if the Inspector could be dodged.

We went on by the erratic route that Rosalind had planned to hide the trail. There were more stony places and more streams until finally we urged the horses up a steep bank and into the woods. Before long we encountered a trackway running south-west, and kept along parallel with it until the sky began to show grey. Then we turned deeper into the woods, and found a glade where there was grass for the horses.

After our meal of bread and cheese Rosalind said, "Since you slept so well earlier on, you'd better take the first watch."

She and Petra settled themselves comfortably in blankets and soon dropped off. I sat with my bow across my knees, and half a dozen arrows stuck handy in the ground. There was nothing to be heard but the birds, an occasional small animal moving somewhere, and the munching sounds of the greathorses. Presently the sun gave more warmth. Every now and then I got up and

prowled silently round the glade, with an arrow nocked on the string. I found nothing, but it helped me to keep awake.

After a couple of hours or so Michael came through. "Where are you now?"

I explained as well as I knew.

"Where are you heading?" he wanted to know.

"South-west," I told him. "We're going to move by night, and lie up by day."

He approved of that, but, "The devil of it is that with this Fringes trouble there'll be a lot of patrols about. I don't know that Rosalind was very wise about those greathorses. If you're seen at all, word will go round like wildfire—even your tracks will be enough. There's hell to pay over this. They must have been much more certain and much more worried than we thought. They're going to send posses after you.

"I'm going to volunteer for one of them. Meanwhile, I'll plant a report of your having been seen making south-east. When that peters out we'll have another ready to take them north-west. If anyone sees you, do your best to stop him getting away. But don't shoot. There's an order out not to use guns except when necessary, and to investigate all gun shots."

I had deliberately decided against taking a gun, on account of the noise; besides, they are slow to load, and if you run out of powder they are useless. Arrows haven't the range, but are silent, and you can get a dozen of them off while a man is reloading a gun.

Everybody laid off projecting. I kept my watch for another hour, and then woke Rosalind for her turn. Petra did not stir. I lay down beside her, and was asleep in a couple of minutes.

Perhaps I was sleeping uneasily, or perhaps it was just a coincidence that I woke to catch an anguished thought from Rosalind. "I've killed him, Michael He's quite dead." And then a chaotic, panicky thought-shape.

Michael came in, steady and reassuring. "Don't be scared, Rosalind. You had to. This is war between our kind and theirs. You mustn't be frightened, Rosalind; it was necessary."

I looked round the glade. Petra lay still sleeping beside me; the greathorses were peacefully cropping the grass. Michael came in again. "Hide him, Rosalind. Find a hollow, and pile leaves over him."

A pause. Then Rosalind, without panic now, but deeply distressed, agreeing.

Presently she appeared among the bushes, walking slowly, cleaning an arrow on a tuft of grass as she came.

"What happened?" I asked.

She did not seem able to get a proper hold over her thought-shapes, she was distressed and chaotic. When she came nearer she used words instead, "It was a man. He had found the trail of the horses, and he was following them. I—I didn't want to, but what else could I do?"

She began to cry. I put my arm round her and tried to comfort

her. I could only back up Michael's assurances that she had done what was necessary.

The day wore on. Nothing came to us from Michael or any of the rest. Then, in the afternoon, something suddenly did come. It was not a thought-shape; it had no real form; it was simply distress, like a cry of agony Petra gasped, and threw herself into Rosalind's arms. The impact was so sharp and yet formless that we did not know which of them it came from. Then there was a jumble of pain, shame, and an overriding desolation, with characteristics that were Katherine's.

Swiftly followed a wave of love and sympathy from Sally to her. Then, quickly, to all of us, " They've broken Katherine. You mustn't blame her, any of you. Don't blame her, please. They're torturing her. It might have been any of us. She's all clouded. She can't hear us . ." Sally broke off, in great distress herself.

Presently there came Michael; unsteady at first, and then hardening into as rigid a form as I had ever received, " I shall kill that Inspector. I shall kill him for what he's done to Katherine."

After that, there was nothing for an hour or more. We did our best to soothe Petra. She understood little of it, but she had caught the intensity, and that had been enough to frighten her.

Then there was Sally again, dully, hopelessly forcing herself to it, " Katherine has confessed; admitted it. I have confirmed. They would have forced me to it, too, in the end. I—I couldn't face it. Not the hot iron; not once she had told them. Forgive me, all of you. Forgive us both . . ."

Then Michael, trembling a little, " Sally dear, we're not blaming you—either of you. But what have you admitted? How much? "

" About thought-shapes—and David and Rosalind."

" Petra, too? "

" Yes . . . Oh, oh, oh! " There was an unshaped surge of anguish. " We had to—poor little Petra—but they were almost sure, you see, because she went with David and Rosalind. There was no other reason for her to go with them No lie would cover it."

" Anyone else? "

" No. We've told them there isn't anyone else. I hope they believe that. They are still asking questions, trying to understand about it. They want to know how we make thought-shapes, and what the range is. We're telling them lies. Not more than about five miles, we're saying, and pretending it is only vague and indefinite at that distance. Katherine's barely conscious. She can't send to you. But they keep on asking questions, on and on. If you could see what they've done. Oh Katherine, darling . . Her feet—oh, her feet . . ." Sally's patterns clouded into anguish, and then faded away. We were afraid something queer must have happened to her mind. We heard no more from either of them.

Nobody else came in. I think we were all too deeply shocked. Words must be chosen and interpreted: thought-shapes, you *feel*.

The sun was lowering, and we were beginning to pack up when Michael made contact again.

" Now, listen to me," he told us, " this really is serious. They are badly alarmed over us. Usually if a Deviation gets clear of a district they let him go—he can't settle anywhere else without proofs of identity and an inspection, so he's pretty well bound to end up in the Fringes. But what they particularly don't like about us is that nothing shows. We could pass for normal anywhere. So a proclamation's gone out, describing the three of you and announcing that you have officially been posted as blasphemous deviations. Therefore you are non-human and not entitled to any of the rights or protections of human society.

" In effect, you are outlaws. Anyone may shoot you on sight, without penalty. There's a small reward if your deaths are reported and confirmed; but there is a much larger reward if you are taken alive.

" They're afraid of us. It isn't just a question of the true image—though they put it that way. We could be superior to them, dangerous to them—that's what they've seen. Imagine a number of us able to think-together and plan and co-ordinate without all their machinery of words and messages: we could outwit them all. They've seen that. So we are to be stamped out before there can be any more of us. It is what I told you: a war between our kind and theirs."

" Are they going to kill Sally and Katherine? "

That was an incautious question from Rosalind. We waited for any response from either. There was none. We couldn't tell what that meant; they might have closed their minds again, or be exhausted, or perhaps dead already . . .

Presently Michael asked, " Which way are you going? "

" South-west," I told him. " We thought of stopping in Wild Country, but if any hunter is licensed to shoot us, we must go on into the Fringes, I think."

" That'd be best. When the first panic is over we must see if we can't fake your deaths. I'll try to think of a way of doing that. Tomorrow I shall be with a search-party moving south-east. I'll let you know how it goes. Meanwhile, be sure that you shoot first."

On that, we broke off. Rosalind finished packing up the gear, and made the panniers more comfortable than before. We climbed up, I on the left, the other two together on the right. Rosalind reached out and gave a thump on the huge flank, and we moved ponderously on again. At once, Petra, who had been unusually subdued during the preparations, burst into tears, and radiated distress-thoughts again.

She did not, it emerged through her snuffles, want to go to the Fringes. Nor did we. It is hard to lose childhood associations, and it becomes harder still when you have nothing to put in their place. The children in Waknuk are brought up in nervous awe of the Fringes. Mothers silence troublesome infants by threatening,

" Be good, now. If you're not, I'll fetch Hairy Jack from the Fringes to you. He's got four eyes to watch you with, and four arms to smack you with. So you be careful."

Even when one had outgrown the tales and inquired what the Fringes were really like, the answers were usually unsatisfactory. My father's, for example, " The Fringes, my boy? An evil place, a place of abominations; a region of sin where the Devil struts his wide estates, and the laws of God are mocked! " was impressive, rather than informative.

Michael began to tell Petra how the Fringes weren't really the bogy place that people talked about. Most of the people who lived there had been turned out of their homes and sent away just because they didn't look like ordinary people. We might ourselves have had extra fingers or toes by mistake, and if we had, we should have been sent to the Fringes—although we should be just the same people inside as we were now . . .

But at this stage Petra interrupted him. " Who is the other one? " she asked.

" What other one? What do you mean? " he asked.

" Somebody else making think-pictures mixed up with yours," she told him.

There was a pause. I couldn't detect any thought-shapes at all; then, " I don't get anything," came from Michael.

There was a sharp, strong sign from Petra. In words, it would have been an impatient " Shut up! " We subsided, and waited. I glanced across at the other pannier. Rosalind had one arm round Petra, and was looking down at her attentively. Petra herself had her eyes open, but unseeing, as though all her attention were on listening. Presently she relaxed a little.

" What is it? " Rosalind asked her.

Petra's reply was puzzled, and not very clearly shaped.

" Somebody asking. She's a long, long way away, I think. She says she's had my afraid-thought before. She wants to know who I am, and where I am. Shall I tell her? "

There was a moment's consideration, then Michael inquired whether we were all agreed that Petra should try. His touch of excitement must have been shared by us all.

" All right, Petra. Go ahead and tell her."

" I shall have to be very loud," Petra warned us. " She's such a long way away." It was as well she told us that. If she had gone ahead while our minds were still wide open, she'd have blistered them. I closed mine, and tried to concentrate my attention on the way ahead of us. It was not an effective defence, though it helped. Petra's thought-shapes were simple, as one would expect at her age, but they came with such violence and brilliance that they left me feeling dazzled and deafened.

When it was over, Michael inquired, " Where is she? "

" Over there," replied Petra.

" She's pointing south-west," I explained.

" Did you ask her the name of the place? " inquired Rosalind.

" Yes. But it didn't mean anything, except that there were two of it, and a lot of water," said Petra, obscurely, and in words. " She doesn't understand where I am, either I have tried to tell her we are at Waknuk in Labrador."

" Tell her to spell in letter-shapes," suggested Rosalind

" But I can't read letters," Petra objected tearfully.

" Oh dear," said Rosalind. " But at least we can send. If I give you the letter-shapes one by one, you can think them to her How about that? " Doubtfully, Petra agreed to try

Rosalind pictured an L. Petra relayed it with devastating force. Rosalind followed with an A, and so on until the word was complete. Then Petra told us, " She understands, but she doesn't know where Labrador is. She says she'll try to find out. She wants to send me her letter-shapes, but I told her it's no good."

" But it is, darling. You get her letter-shapes, then you let us have them—only *gently*, so that we can read them."

Presently we got the first one. It was Z. We were disappointed.

" She's got it back to front. It must be S," Michael decided.

We built up the rest of the word.

" Well, the others are proper letters," Michael admitted. " SEALAND—it must—"

All was blotted out by Petra conversing indignantly with the unknown. She finished this with the triumphant announcement: " It *is* Z. She says it's different from S: like the noise a bee makes."

" All right," said Michael. " But ask her if there is a lot of sea there."

Petra came back shortly with, " Yes. There's sea all round. And from where she is now you can see the sun shining on it for miles and miles and it's all blue—"

" She's crazy," objected Michael " It's the middle of the night."

" It isn't where she is," said Petra. " And there are lots and lots of houses, different from Waknuk, and much, much bigger, and there are funny things running along the road, without horses. And things in the air with whizzing things on top of them—"

" Sort of fish-shaped things, Petra? " I asked, with a sudden feeling of excitement.

" Yes," she agreed.

The more she told me, the more excited I became. Almost everything fitted in with the dreams I used to have when I was small. It was like a sudden inspiration to realize that all this existed now somewhere in the world, and it was not simply the ways of the Old People that I had been dreaming about. However, Petra was tired, and it would keep, so presently she and Rosalind lay down to sleep.

Just after the sun had risen Michael came through in some agitation. " They've picked up your trail, David. That man Rosalind shot. His dog found him, and then they found the greathorse tracks. Our lot is turning back to the south-west to join the hunt. You'd better push on. Where are you now? "

The best I could tell him was that we had calculated that we must be within a few miles of Wild Country now.

"Then get moving," he advised. "The longer you wait, the more time they have to get round and cut you off."

I woke Rosalind and explained. Ten minutes later we were on our way again, with Petra still half asleep. Now that speed was more important than concealment, we kept to the first southward track we found, and urged the greathorses to a ponderous trot.

A couple of miles on, the stretch of woods came to an abrupt end and we found ourselves facing another shallow, cultivated valley, about a mile and a half across to where the trees began again on the farther side. Most of the land was grazing, with a few sheep and cattle scattered about behind rail and post fences. One of the few arable fields lay to our immediate left. The young crop in it looked as if it might be meant for oats, but it deviated to an extent that would have caused it to be burnt long ago at home.

We found it an encouraging sight; it could only mean that we had reached a region where the stock could not be kept pure.

We passed a farm that was little better than a cluster of sheds, where four or five men and a couple of women were gathered. One glanced our way, and the rest turned to stare. I don't think they can ever have seen a greathorse before; the sight of two cantering towards them with a thunderous rumble of hoofbeats struck them rigid with amazement. There was no need for us to shoot. The whole group ran for shelter, and we pounded by, unmolested.

At the edge of the forest I looked back. The people had emerged from their shelter and were standing in a little group, staring after us.

After two or three miles we left the trees again and came out into more open country, dotted not only with bushes, but with grass thickets. Nearly all the grass was very coarse and large-leafed, but in some places it grew in enormous tufts with the sharp blades standing eight or ten feet high. Among them we wound our way for an hour or more until we came to a copse of queer, but fair-sized trees. It offered shelter and hiding, and inside it we found a glade with a more ordinary kind of grass that the great-horses could eat, so we decided to halt there and sleep.

I hobbled the horses while Rosalind unrolled the blankets, and presently we were all hungrily eating our bread and cheese. It was pleasantly peaceful until Petra put out one of her blinding communications, so suddenly that I bit my tongue.

"For heaven's sake, child!" protested Rosalind, putting her hand to her head.

"Sorry. I forgot," said Petra perfunctorily. Then she told us, "She wants to talk to one of you. She says, will you all try to hear her while she thinks her loudest."

"All right," we agreed, "but you keep quiet, or you'll blind us."

I, certainly, tried very hard, but there was nothing—or as near nothing as the shimmer of a heat-haze.

We relaxed again. " No good," I said. " You'll have to tell her we can't reach her, Petra."

We damped out the exchange that followed as much as possible, then Petra reduced the force of her thoughts so that they did not dazzle us, and started to relay the thoughts she was receiving. They had to be very simple so that she could copy them even though she did not understand them, and they came to us rather like baby-talk, with many repeats to make sure we understood.

The main, urgent emphasis was on importance—the importance of Petra. At all costs she must be protected. Such a power of projection as hers was unheard of without special training—it was a very valuable discovery indeed. Help was already on the way to us. But until it came, we must play for time and safety—Petra's safety, not, apparently, our own—at all costs.

" Did you get that? " I asked the others.

They had. Michael said, " She finds Petra's ability particularly surprising among 'backward and primitive people.' Who is she meaning—not us, surely? "

" Certainly it was us," responded Rosalind. " Not a shadow of doubt about that."

" There must be something wrong," I put in. " She must be thinking we are Fringes people. And as for help . . . She's somewhere south-west, and everybody knows that there are miles and miles of Badlands that way. I don't see how she can possibly help."

Petra emerged from her contemplations to add conversationally, " Zealand must be a funny place. Everybody there can make think-pictures—well, nearly everybody—and nobody wants to hurt them for it. They aren't all very good at it, though—most of them are more like you and David," she told us. " *She's* much better than most of them, and she's got two babies she thinks will be good at it. She doesn't think they'll be as good as me, though. She says I can make stronger think-pictures than anybody at all," she added complacently.

" That doesn't surprise me a bit," said Rosalind deflatingly. " The next thing you want to learn is to make *good* think-pictures, not just noisy ones."

Petra remained unabashed. " *She* says people who can only talk with words can never understand one another much; so they're not a lot of good compared with think-picture people."

We let her prattle on. But one thing stood out clearly—these Zealanders thought very well of themselves, and it looked as if Rosalind had been right when she said that " primitive " had meant ordinary Labrador people.

When it was clear starlight we began to pack up. I had crossed the glade, and was stooping to unhobble one of the greathorses when there was a sudden command in my mind.

" Don't move! "

It was a rough, uncouth thought-shape, not made by anyone I knew, but it was plain and threatening.

I straightened up slowly. My bow was back with Rosalind and Petra. Rosalind had caught the order too.

"Who is it?" she was asking. Then there was a sudden flash of alarm.

"What's that?" I asked her.

"I was reaching for the bow. An arrow struck just by my hand."

"Better stay still," came the rough thought-shape, warningly. I looked at the trees round the glade, but could see nothing in the shadow. Then, to the left, I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye.

Four men came out into the dim starlight, all with bows drawn and arrows aimed; two at me, two at Rosalind and Petra.

"Who are you?" Rosalind and I sent to them simultaneously. Whether there was any reply or not we couldn't tell, for at that moment Petra set up the alarm-pattern, and blotted everything.

The party of four split up. Soon I could see that the two who came my way were dressed in rags. I knew that they must be Fringes people.

I looked at them harder as they came close, but if there was anything visible amiss with them, there was too little light for me to see it. One of them stopped a few yards away, keeping his arrow trained on me; the other came round behind me and patted my waist and pockets. He discovered my knife and transferred it into his own pocket. That done, they allowed their caution to relax, and studied the greathorses with astonishment.

Petra's alarm diminished. I was able to get through to Rosalind. She told me, "He's telling Petra it's all right, and nobody's going to hurt her."

"Who?" put in Michael. "What on earth's going on? What was Petra howling about?"

A roughly shaped, weakly projected thought cut in, "No need to be scared. Just do as we tell you."

"What was that?" asked Michael, startled. "Something just outside my range . . ."

I explained, as far as I could. The other two men came across, helping Rosalind and Petra to carry our possessions. One of them said, "How do you get up on these brutes?"

Presently we moved off. Rosalind and Petra were in their former pannier, but they had one of the men in the other, and another on the saddle-board between them. I was in the left-hand pannier of the led horse, with the other two men similarly disposed. All four men were holding their bows ready.

As we came out of the copse into the coarse-grass country again I caught a clumsy thought-shape, "If you make any noise, you'll bring *them* after us."

This time I managed to place it as coming from the man on the saddle-board beside me. I asked him who he was, and where he was taking us, but there was no response. In a low voice, in words, I asked, "Can't you reach me?"

He understood what I meant, for he shook his head. " No, but I can get the little girl sometimes—that's how we picked you up. Who is it she talks to? "

I told him that it was someone far away that the rest of us couldn't reach. He understood that, too.

" Queer thing, this," he said. " Different strengths, and different kinds, too. Better not to talk now. It isn't safe round here."

For the next couple of miles we went on in silence except for the thumping tread of the greathorses' hoofs and some creaking from the panniers. A few small creatures scuttled out of our way, but we met no large animals. Then there was a line of deeper darkness ahead, and an edge of the forest loomed up like a black wall across our path. We held straight on, and had come within a hundred yards of it when, without warning, a gun fired somewhere to our right, and shot whistled past us.

Both horses were startled, and plunged. I was almost flung out of my pannier. How the man on the saddle-board held on I don't know. The one between the panniers on the leading horse did not: he sailed through the air as if in flight. The rearing horses pulled away, and the lead rope parted with a snap. The other horse bolted towards the forest, then changed its mind, and swerved to the left. Ours pelted after it. There was nothing to be done but wedge oneself in the pannier and hang on. The man on the saddle-board above me still contrived to keep his seat, holding on grimly in a rain of clods and stones thrown up by the hoofs of the lead horse.

Somewhere behind us a gun fired again, and we speeded up even more.

For a mile or so, we covered the ground at a ponderous, earth-shaking gallop. Then I caught sight of a flash ahead and half left. At the sound of the shot, our horse, almost level with the other now, sprang sideways in mid stride, and swerved to the right. It was too abrupt for the man on our saddle-board. He suddenly wasn't there any more, and we were racing towards the forest again. I crouched low as we crashed among the trees.

By luck alone, we entered at a point where the bigger trunks were well spaced; but, for all that, it was a nightmare ride, with saplings and branches slapping and dragging at the baskets. One could do nothing but keep crouched in order to avoid being knocked out of them. The greathorse simply ploughed ahead, avoiding the larger trees, thrusting through the rest, smashing its way by sheer weight while branches cracked and snapped before and beneath it. If we had not lost the man on the saddle-board before, he would certainly have been swept away then.

The horse was forced to slow down, but its panic determination to get away from the guns abated very little. I braced with arms and legs and my whole body to avoid being battered about in the pannier, scarcely daring to raise my head for a quick look. It was impossible to tell whether there was any pursuit, but it seemed improbable in the dark. A horse of ordinary size would most

likely have disembowelled itself in trying to follow over the snapped-off stems that must have been standing up like stakes behind us.

The pace and the violence eased a little. I sought anxiously for Rosalind. She came in from somewhere close by, on the right. She and Petra had managed to wedge and pack themselves in with blankets, and seemed less shaken than I was. I suggested that if they had control of their horse, they should pull over to the left and try to converge with us.

Our animal had a halter but no bridle, so that we could do nothing with it; the best hope seemed to be that if we could get together, it would follow the other out of habit when it was calmer. Presently, however, the trees thinned and we came out into starlight. Our horse caught sight of the other, whinnied, and trotted up to it. In a moment or two we had the lead rope joined. The two remaining men consulted briefly, and then we were off again, headed once more to the south-west.

The steady plod was soothing. Presently I let it lull me to sleep. There was nothing one could do by keeping awake, and Rosalind and I had quite a loss of sleep to make up. Petra, who had slept half the previous day, started to converse with her distant friend, but soon even that couldn't keep me awake.

When I did become conscious again the sky was showing grey, and there was Michael agitating somewhere directly behind us.

"*Was* it you they fired at last night?" he was asking.

There was a sense of disappointment when I told him it was. "I hoped they'd made a mistake and were off on a false trail," he said. "We've all been called together. They think it's too risky to come farther into the Fringes in small groups. We're supposed to be assembled and ready to move off in two or three hours. Round about a hundred, I'd say. They reckon that if we do meet any Fringes people it'll kill two birds with one stone if we give 'em a good hiding. You'd better get rid of those greathorses now—we'll never lose your trail while you're on them."

"That's not in our hands," I told him, and explained the situation.

"Well, at least persuade them to keep on going, then," he advised.

Petra broke in, "The Zealand people are coming to help. They're much nearer now."

Michael received that sceptically. "That'll be nice—*if* they can. The wisest thing you can do is get rid of those horses quickly and let them lay a false trail."

As it grew lighter I was able to see our surroundings better. My father had evidently been right about normality being mocked in those parts. I could scarcely recognize a single tree—there were familiar trunks, but with the wrong kinds of leaves; there were familiar branches, growing out of the wrong kinds of bark, and here and there fantastic fences of immense brambles.

Once there was a stretch of open ground that looked like a dried river-bed covered with pebbles, but the pebbles turned out

to be white balls of fungi set as close as they could grow. There were some trees with trunks too soft to stand upright, so that they grew along the ground, and quite often there were patches of miniature trees, shrunk and gnarled, and looking centuries old.

I glanced cautiously at the man in the other pannier, but I couldn't see anything wrong with him except that he was very dirty, as were the ragged clothes and battered hat that he wore. He caught my look quite amiably.

"You've never been in the Fringes before, boy?" he asked.

"No," I told him. "Is it all like this?"

He grinned, and shook his head. "None of it's like any other part," he said. "Nothing grows true to stock yet."

"Yet?" I repeated.

"Sure. It'll settle down in time. The Wild Country was Fringes once, but it's settling down, and some of your parts were once Wild Country, but they've settled down more. I reckon God has a pattern for it all, but He does take His time."

"God?" I said. "They've always taught me that the Devil rules the Fringes."

He shook his head. "That's what they would tell you, of course. But it isn't so, boy. It's your parts where the Devil is. Where men are arrogant and self-satisfied. That's why God sent Tribulation."

"Oh," I said cautiously. It did not seem wise in the circumstances to argue. Besides, with everybody else always knowing so much about God's intentions, I was at a disadvantage.

Luckily Rosalind woke up just then, and came in asking what had happened. I handed on what Michael had told me, and asked whether she thought we should tell the two men about the intended pursuit. We decided we would.

The man in the other pannier was quite unsurprised.

"Sure," he said. "That's what we want." But he did not explain further, and we plodded steadily on.

Petra began to converse with her mysterious friend again, and there was no doubt that she was closer. For the first time I began to catch the other side of their exchange, and Petra herself did not have to use such disturbing force to reach her. Rosalind caught it, too. She put out a question as strongly as she could. The answer came back clearly; pleased to have made contact, and anxious to know more than Petra could tell.

Between us, we explained what we could of our present situation. The answer came cautiously, "Be careful. Be emphatic about the danger you are in from your own people. Some deviational tribes detest anyone without visible deviations."

We could only tell her that the men with us *looked* normal.

"Be careful," she repeated. "The really important thing is the little girl. Keep her safe at all costs. We have never known such a power of projection in one so young. What is her name?"

Rosalind spelt it out in letter-forms. Then she added, "But who are you? What is this Zealand?"

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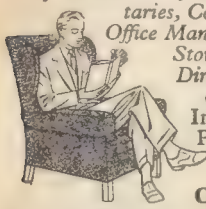

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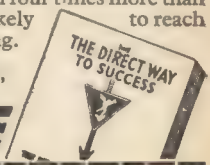

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"The kind of people that God intended?" I suggested, with a feeling of being on familiar ground.

"I don't know about that. But we do know that we can make a better world than the Old People. They were savages, half men. Shut off from one another, with only inadequate words to link them; tribes shut off by different languages; minds shut off by different religions. There was never any unity in them.

"Individually, some of them could think: collectively, they could not. The more complex they made their world, the less capable they were of dealing with it. They had no means of consensus. They could co-operate constructively in small units, but only destructively in large ones. They aspired greedily, and then refused the responsibilities they had created. With one hand they grasped reason, with the other they rejected it. Singly, some of them tried to be men; in groups, they remained primitive There was, you see, no real communication between them: the system of words could work at all only where individuals were very similar: applied to large numbers, it broke down.

"They brought down Tribulation, which all but destroyed them. They were inadequate."

Brought up as I had been, with a reverence for the Old People, and the belief that they were the true image, I found this both difficult to accept and shocking. While I was still wrestling with it, Rosalind asked, "But you? where do you come from?"

"Our ancestors had the luck to live on an island—or rather two islands. They did not escape Tribulation altogether, but it was less bad here. However, they were cut off from the rest of the world and became almost barbaric again. Then, somehow, the strain of people who could think-together began. Soon, those who were best at it began to find other people who could do it a little, and to teach them to do it better. And of course, the people who could do it preferred to marry others who could do it, and the strain became stronger.

"Later on, when they started to find that there were thought-shape-makers in other places too, they realized how lucky they had been that there was so little deviation in Zealand, and so little feeling about it. It was not like that in most places. Even where they don't take much notice of physical deviations they are usually superstitiously afraid of people who can think-together.

"For a long time nothing could be done to help the same kind of people in other places—though some who were not too far away sailed to Zealand in canoes; but later on, when we had machines again, we were able to fetch them into safety. We try to do that wherever we can make contact with them—but we have never before made a contact at anything like the distance away that you are. The little girl is unique, and tremendously important. Petra must be protected at all costs."

The greathorses clumped steadily on. Presently we came into more open country; a wind was blowing that we had not noticed among the trees. A sudden gust snatched off the man's hat, and we stopped for him to retrieve it. As he climbed down, I saw for the first time why he was a dweller in the Fringes. In the top of his head was set a third eye. It was closed.

Half an hour later we arrived on the bank of a small river—at least our side was a steep bank; the other was a line of low reddish cliffs. We turned downstream and kept along the bank until we came to a very deviational tree which looked like a huge pear and had all its branches growing in one big tuft at the top. At that point a runnel cut back into the bank, and it was possible for the horses to get down. We forded the river obliquely, making for a gap in the opposite cliffs. It was a narrow passage, only just wide enough in some places to let us through, so that the panniers scraped and bumped on the rocky walls. After a hundred yards or so, it widened out and we began to climb up to normal ground level.

Where it finished stood seven or eight men, with bows in their hands. They gaped unbelievingly at the greathorses, and looked half inclined to run. We stopped.

" Down you get," instructed the man in the other pannier.

Petra and Rosalind were climbing down, too. The men dropped some of our blankets and bags to us, and then the greathorses moved on. Petra clasped my hand apprehensively, but for the moment the bowmen remained more interested in the horses than in us.

There was nothing immediately alarming about the men. One of the hands that held a bow had six fingers, and one man's head looked like a polished brown egg, without a hair on it, or on his face. Another had grotesquely huge feet and hands, but whatever was wrong with the rest of them was hidden under their rags.

Rosalind and I shared a feeling of relief. Petra, also, was encouraged by finding that none of them answered to the description of Hairy Jack. Presently, when the horses had disappeared up a path into the forest, their attention returned to us. A couple of them helped to pick up the bundles, and told us to come along.

A well-used path led us into the woods for a couple of hundred yards or more, and then gave on to a clearing. There may have been a natural glade there, but it had been enlarged, and quite recently. Most of it was now covered with huts and tents, with a few men and rather more women moving about among them. We wound our way towards one of the largest tents, a framework of poles supporting what looked like an old rick-cover. Just inside it, sitting on a roughly made stool, was a figure that I recognized with a shock: the same spider-man whom I had seen as a captive at Waknuk seven years before.

He lifted his head and glanced at the three of us. Then he studied me more carefully. He nodded, as if satisfied. " Remember me? " he asked.

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" Yes," I said.

" Know who I am? "

" I think so. I think I found out," I told him.

He looked at me questioningly.

" My father had an elder brother," I said. " He was thought to be normal until he was about three years old. Then his certificate from the Inspector was revoked, and he was sent away."

He nodded slowly. " Not quite right," he said. " When they came to take him away he was already missing—but they'd hush that up, of course."

He paused reflectively, then he added, " The eldest son. Waknuk should be mine. It is not—just because of *this*." He stretched out his long arm, and regarded it. " Do you know what the length of a man's arm should be? "

" No," I admitted.

" Nor do I. But somebody in Rigo does, some expert on the true image—so I must live like a savage among savages. Are you the eldest son? "

" The only son," I told him. " There was a younger one, but . . ."

" No certificate, eh? "

I nodded.

" So you, too, have lost Waknuk! "

That was an aspect which had not troubled me. I do not think I had ever had any real expectation of inheriting it. There had always been the sense of insecurity—the feeling, knowledge almost, that some day, sooner or later, I should be discovered. It had been too near the inevitable for me to feel the resentment that embittered him.

After gazing at me thoughtfully a moment, he turned his attention to Rosalind and Petra. I explained who they were.

" But what I don't quite understand," he said, " is why they are after you in such strength."

" I think," I told him, " that we trouble them more than ordinary deviations because they've no way of identifying us. Also, I think they suspect that there may be a lot more of us that they don't know about, and they want to make us tell."

" An extra-good reason for not being caught," he said.

I was aware that Michael had come in, and that Rosalind was answering him, but I could not pay attention to two things at once, so I left that to her.

" They are coming right into the Fringes after you. How many of them? " asked the man.

" I'm not sure," I said, wondering how to play it to the best advantage.

" You can find out," he said flatly.

I wondered how much he knew about us, and whether he knew about Michael, too. He looked me straight in the eye, and went on, " It'll be better for you to co-operate with us fully. It's you they're after, and it would be quite simple for us to leave you

where they can find you. Why should we care what happens to you unless you help us?"

Petra caught the implication of that, and panicked. "Almost a hundred men," she told him.

He looked at her, considering for a moment. "So there *is* one of you with them." He nodded thoughtfully again. "A hundred is a great many men to send after just you three. Too many . . . I see." He turned back to me. "There have been rumours of trouble working up in the Fringes?"

"Yes," I admitted.

He grinned. "So for the first time they decide to take the initiative and invade us—and pick you up, too, of course. They'll be following your trail. How far have they got?"

I consulted Michael. I learnt that they had passed the place where our bolting greathorses had taken to the forest, but I couldn't find any way of conveying to the man their exact situation.

"Is your father with them?" he asked.

It was a question I had been careful not to put to Michael before, and I didn't put it now. I simply paused, and then told him no. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Petra about to speak, and Rosalind checking her.

"A pity," said the man. "I've been wanting to meet your father on equal terms for a long time now. Maybe he's not such a champion of the true image as I've heard, after all." He went on looking at me with a steady, penetrating gaze. I could feel Rosalind's sympathy like a clasp of the hand.

Presently the man unfolded himself, and went out with a queer, gangling walk, and we were left in his tent, with a man on guard. Rosalind got out a loaf and what was left of the cheese, and found a pot of water. It was a considerable time since we had eaten, but, for all that, I did not feel very hungry.

Petra again began to converse with her Zealand friends, and seemed to be promoting confusion there. Rosalind broke in to straighten that out and explain what had happened. For the first time they sounded dismayed when they answered. It was with awe that they told us, "This is dreadful country. None of us has ever seen anything as bad as this. There are miles and miles where it looks as if all the ground has been fused into black glass. Then stretches of Badlands, then more rough black glass. It goes on and on. If we did not know that you were on the other side of it we should have turned back."

Petra caught the thought of turning back, and began to blot out everything with distress. Rosalind put an arm round her and soothed her. When we had quietened Petra so that the Zealand woman could get through again, Rosalind asked, "When will you come? What are we to do?"

There was a pause, as if for consultation, then the Zealand woman told her, "We'll come as fast as we can, but you mustn't reckon on anything less than three hours—perhaps a little more."

"Michael," asked Rosalind, "are you in the front of the party?"

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" Fairly well up," he told her. " Why? "

" I think you should drop back if you can manage it," she told him. " Have trouble with a girth, or something. It looks as if there is a trap planned by the Fringes people, some kind of ambush. Isn't it possible for you to drop out and then work round and join us here? "

Michael considered. " But I don't see how that could be done. The Fringes people must be out to get us. A straggler would be picked off before he'd any chance to explain."

There was a pause while we tried to think of some way round the difficulty. While we were still at it, Petra chipped in, " Michael, is Father there? "

She took him off guard. I caught his yes before his quick effort to suppress it. I looked at Petra . . .

Rosalind moved beside me and took my hand. Her mind was full of sympathy, but mine was filled with bitterness. I could hear my father's voice, " A baby which . . . would grow to breed, and, breeding, spread pollution until all round us there would be mutants and abominations. That has happened in places where the will and faith were weak, but here it shall *never* happen."

And then my Aunt Harriet's words to my father, "I shall pray God to send charity into this hideous world . . ."

" She was right," I told myself. " The world *is* hideous."

Rosalind's hand tightened on mine. " No, David, no," she said. " You mustn't be blind—like *them*."

" What am I supposed to do? " I asked, looking at Petra. " He is our father. Do I forgive him? Agree with him? Try to kill him? "

Petra's Zealand friend came in suddenly and strongly, " Leave him—that is all. Your father is part of the old world. He thinks he is the lord of creation. Change is his enemy. He does not want life. A living creature defies evolution at its peril; for if it cannot adapt, it will be broken. He is one of the Old People. He will go the way of the dinosaurs, and find his static world among the fossils."

" And you? " I asked.

" Us? Oh, we—and you, too—are just beginning. We are the chrysalis of the future, of a new world. We can think-together and understand one another; we can share. We don't have to try to cramp life into cages of words; we don't need laws that treat living forms as if they were bricks; we could never think of trying to mint ourselves and our children into equality and identity like stamped coins. We don't try to hammer life into geometrical shapes: life is evolution, and we are part of it."

There I am brought up against that very barrier of words, for what I was receiving was an impression, a view, an attitude, but ordinary words still have to serve, however inadequately, for its permanent expression and preservation, until somebody can invent a device that records and conveys thought. Above all, the impression we were receiving was of freshness and confidence; the shaking-

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off of old habits. If we could not grasp the whole pattern of thought at first, we could feel: there was the sensation that a strong fresh wind had been blowing through one's mind, cleaning up the staleness, the frustrations, and the hatreds.

I looked at Rosalind. We smiled at one another.

"That's better, you two. That's much better," a thought approved.

"I don't understand much," came from Michael, "but I feel as if a prison door were opening." And from far away came one of the others, faintly echoing him.

At that moment the spider-man returned. He stood in the tent entrance, surveying us.

"I ought to put you three out of the way," he said. "Have you been warning the one of you who's with them?"

"They're watching for an ambush, anyway," I told him. "Besides, how could he hand on a warning without giving himself away?"

"That's why you're still alive," he said briefly. "How far away are they now?"

I consulted Michael. "They're just clear of the forest, and surprised to have got through it without an ambush," I told him.

"So maybe a bit careless. Good," he said. "Better tell your friend to get himself lost, and turn back," he suggested as he left us again.

I put that to Michael, but he said he had missed his chance;

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the country was too open now. I went over the route in my mind. Since the ambush had been left so long, there was obviously one place for it. " Don't cross the river," I told him. " Fall off, and get carried away downstream."

All was quiet for nearly half an hour. Then the Zealand woman came in again, " Where are you? We want your direction."

Petra responded energetically. Twenty minutes or so after that, Michael reported, " The Fringes people have muffed it. We've spotted one of them moving on the top of the cliffs—and that cleft was too obviously a trap, anyway. We're splitting into two crossings, upstream and downstream, and we're going to pincer in on the far bank, beyond the defile."

The camp was no great distance behind the cliffs. It looked as if we should be caught within the pincers. I told the man who had been left to guard us, " Fetch the tall man quickly. It's important."

He gave a grin, full of oafish cunning, and shook his head. He was not going to be caught that way. I tried to persuade him to take us to the man, but he was just as sure that he knew the catch there too. When I went closer to the tent entrance to argue with him, he swung a knobbed stick expertly within an inch of my head, driving me back. I retreated, and for some minutes we all sat and fretted while the man grinned at us, pleased with himself.

After a while Rosalind came through. " Try to draw him down to the left side of the entrance, David. Be ready to jump in when I distract him."

I stepped forward, trying again to persuade him. He kept on grinning, and swinging his stick to hold me at a distance. Rosalind made her " distraction." A stool flew past me and clipped him on the side of the head. My jump was superfluous. I simply went down on top of him as he folded up, but I acquired a useful knobbed stick.

" What's going on? " inquired Michael, anxiously.

" We're going to try to get out before your pincers close. We'll make due west, away from the cliffs," I told him.

" Better hurry," he advised. " We're over the river downstream from you."

We made off through the litter of tents and hovels, towards the trees We had covered about two-thirds of the distance when there was a shout behind us. We speeded up, but a moment later an arrow struck the ground just in front of our feet. We stopped. At the edge of the trees we saw a man whose big body was supported on short bow-legs. He already had a fresh arrow on the string. " Get back! " he ordered, with a jerk of his head.

There was nothing else to be done. We turned round and faced two men who had come running after us. I dropped my stick pacifically and tried again to explain about the impending attack. The men were interested only in hustling us back to the tent we had left. We had barely reached it when a gun went off among the trees, somewhere on the left. There were three or four more shots, then silence, then another two shots.

A few moments later a crowd of ragged men, and quite a number of women with them came pouring out of the woods, making away from the scene of the intended ambush, and towards the firing. A few were obvious deviations, but most of them, at a distance and seen only briefly, looked normal. They were armed with bows and spears, with only two or three guns among them. I saw the spider-man, standing taller than the rest, and called to him, but he was too busy to notice. Nobody was paying any attention to us any longer. We could have run, had we known which was the safe way to run.

"What's happening?" I asked Michael. "Was that your lot shooting?"

"No, that was the other party. They're trying to draw the Fringes people across so that we can come in from the opposite side and take them in the rear."

"They're succeeding," I told him.

I explained that we were beside the biggest tent, near the middle of the clearing.

"I'll try to join you there, and we'll make a break for it," he said.

There was a sound of more firing from the same direction as before. A clamour and shouting broke out. A few spent arrows dropped into the clearing.

Suddenly, there was a strong, clear question: "Are you still safe?"

Petra loosed off a blindingly urgent reply.

"Steady, child, steady! We're coming," the Zealand woman told her.

More arrows started to fall into the left side of the clearing. A few ragged men appeared, retreating out of the trees. More followed them quickly. They dodged, and took cover behind the tents and hovels. Still more came running back out of the woods, arrows spitting after them.

Presently, more arrows began to fall in from the other side of the clearing. The ragged men and women made the discovery that they were between two fires, and started to panic. Horsemen appeared, riding out from the trees on the right.

"What's that?" asked Petra suddenly. "What's that noise?"

Quickly the Zealand woman came in: "Don't be frightened. We're coming now. Stay where you are."

I, too, could hear the noise now; a strange drumming sound that gradually swelled.

One of the horsemen reined in abruptly. He pointed upwards, and shouted.

I looked up, too. There was something above us like a bank of mist, but shot with quick, iridescent flashes.

Above it I could make out, as if through a gauze, one of the strange flying craft that I had dreamt of as a child. The white, fishlike body was glistening through the veil, with something half invisible whizzing round above it. It grew bigger, and the noise grew louder, as it dropped towards us.

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A few weaving threads, like blown cobwebs, came drifting down. Higher up, there were more of them, giving sudden gleams as they twisted and caught the light.

The shooting and the combat fell away. All over the clearing, men lowered their weapons and goggled upwards. Some of the horses whinnied with fright, and swerved to bolt. In a few seconds the whole place was a chaos of running men and plunging horses.

I noticed one man raise his hand to brush off a strand of web that had settled across his face, but he never completed the movement. His hand seemed to stick to it, and he swore in a high, panicky voice.

The Zealand woman came in, steadily directing us: "Don't run. If it touches you, don't struggle. Lie down, so that it can't get round you. Keep calm. Don't move. Just wait."

She was confident and forceful. We moved back into the entrance of the tent. All over the clearing now there were men clawing at themselves, trying to get rid of the stuff, but it stuck to their hands and their clothes, and they struggled with it like flies in treacle while, all the time, more strands floated down on them.

Mostly, they fought it for a few seconds, and then tried to run for the shelter of the trees. They'd manage about three or four steps before their feet stuck together and they pitched to the ground, to be trapped more securely by the threads already lying there. Still more threads settled lightly on them as they struggled until, presently, they could struggle no more.

The horses were no better off. I saw one back into a small bush. When it moved forward, the bush tore out by the roots so that it swung round and touched the other hind leg. The legs became inseparable. The horse overbalanced, and lay kicking out with both legs for a while. A gust of wind swept the clearing as the machine came lower. It sent floating strands eddying into the tent towards us. Quickly we lay down as the woman had told us.

It took a lot of resolution to keep still while the threads settled on us. Behind me, Petra complained that they tickled, and Rosalind firmly told her to keep still. I was still able to turn my head and, looking up, I could see the white shape close overhead now, blowing the threads into a foggy whirl as it settled towards us. Then a gossamer touch on my face made me blink, and when I tried to open my eyes again, I found that the lids were stuck down.

The sound of the machine sank to a lower note; after a time it slowed, and stopped. I could hear a few muffled cries, some snorts and squeals from horses, but soon these subsided into a silence which became uncannily complete. Even the rustle of leaves was missing. The stuff across my face and hands no longer felt feathery; it had tightened, and was like a mesh of fine cords pressing into the skin.

I sought anxiously for Michael. "I'm all right," he assured me. "I got her warning, and kept under the trees."

The Zealand woman came in. "Stay there," she told him.

" Don't move until it has dried. You others," she went on to the rest of us, " start counting slowly so that I can locate you."

I had scarcely got to picturing double figures before I heard steps close beside me. Then there was a hissing sound. Dampness fell on my face and hands, and my skin began to lose the puckered feeling. Something wiped across my eyelids, and I was able to raise them, stickily. A figure, completely hidden in a shiny white suit, was bending over me. In one gloved hand it held a swab of cloth, in the other, a metal bottle that was emitting a fine spray. The woman played the spray up and down me once more, and then turned her attention to Rosalind and Petra.

I sat up. There were still a few filaments adrift, but when they settled where the spray had fallen, they glistened for a moment and then began to dissolve. The clearing looked as if a fantastic number of spiders had spun there with all their might. The whole place, and the trees about it were cocooned in threads which had turned more white than glossy now.

The silence was broken by a sharp cracking on the right. I looked quickly, in time to see a young tree break off a foot from the ground, and fall. Near it, a bush leaned over and pulled free of the ground. One of the shacks crumpled in on itself, and collapsed; a tent suddenly went flat; another shack crackled and gave way. It was uncanny and alarming. Behind me I heard a sigh of relief from Rosalind. Presently Petra remarked, with a subdued, somewhat reproving air, " That was *very* horrid."

I went over and helped them up. The woman waited a moment, then she told us, " Follow me! "

" But there's still Michael! Michael, are you all right? "

" Yes," he came back. " Still under the trees."

" Don't move yet," the Zealand woman told him. " It will be quite harmless in half an hour."

" What's happened to the rest? They look—they—they're not all dead, are they? " he asked.

" Yes," she replied. Then, catching his feeling of shock, she added, " The threads contract as they dry. It is more merciful than your arrows and spears and clubs." She turned again towards the machine, and started to spray ahead of her.

" But Michael—" I protested, once more. She understood.

She broke it to me sympathetically, but the answer was decisive.

" There is a very long way to go. We could not carry four of you all that distance. Michael is the one who is still safe here. He has not been discovered. You could not go back to your homes, but he can. Perhaps, one day, we shall be able to come again."

It is bare in words, but it was comprehensive in thought. She displayed the whole situation swiftly, and where words might have left chinks for protests, she left none. All of us understood the position, and that there was nothing to do but accept it.

" Michael—" I began again.

He cut me short. " You heard her. There's nothing else for it, David. I'll—I'll be all right . . ."

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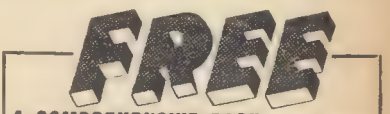

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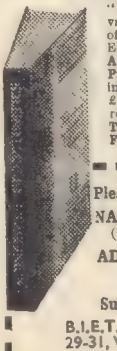

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The fish-shaped craft stood waiting in the middle of the clearing: a door in its side was open, ready for us. The white-suited figure began to spray a path towards it. And we followed.

The city was just as I had seen it in my dreams. A brighter sun than Waknuk ever knew poured down upon the wide blue bay, and the lines of breakers crawling slowly to the beaches. Clustered along the shore, and thinning as they stretched back towards the hills, were white buildings embedded in green parks and gardens. I could make out tiny vehicles sliding along tree-bordered avenues. A little inland, beside a level square of green, a bright light blinked from a tower, and close to it a fish-shaped machine like the one we were in was sinking slowly to earth.

It was all so familiar that for a moment I imagined I should wake up to find myself back in my bed in Waknuk. I took hold of Rosalind's hand to reassure myself.

" It *is* real, isn't it? You *do* see it, too? " I asked her.

" It's real—and it's beautiful, David. I never thought there could be anywhere so lovely . . . And there's something else, too, that you never told me about."

" What? " I asked.

" Listen! Can't you feel it? Open your mind more—Petra darling, if you could stop bubbling over for a few minutes . . ."

I did as she told me. I was aware of the engineer in our machine communicating with someone below, but behind that, as a background to it, there was something new and unknown to me. In terms of sound it could be not unlike the buzzing of a hive of bees; in terms of light, a kind of suffused glow.

" What is it? " I asked, puzzled.

" Can't you guess, David? It's people. Lots and lots of our kind of people." I realized she must be right, and I listened. We were over the land now, looking down at the city as it came slowly up to meet us. " I'm beginning to believe it's real and true at last," I said. " You were never with me those other times."

Rosalind turned to me. " This time, David—" she began, but then she was blotted out. Petra's excitement had got the better of her. Anguished protests came from all directions.

" Oh, sorry," Petra apologized to the ship's crew, and to the city in general, " but it *is* awfully exciting."

We watched the buildings and the towers grow from pictures into solid realities as we dropped towards them. In the composite murmur and glow, we caught thought-patterns of welcome coming up to meet us. It was like coming home at last. Rosalind's hand caught mine again, and pressed it.

" You're right, darling," she said to Petra. " It *is* exciting. It is the most wonderfully exciting thing that could ever happen to people like us."

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ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

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Solution on Page 66

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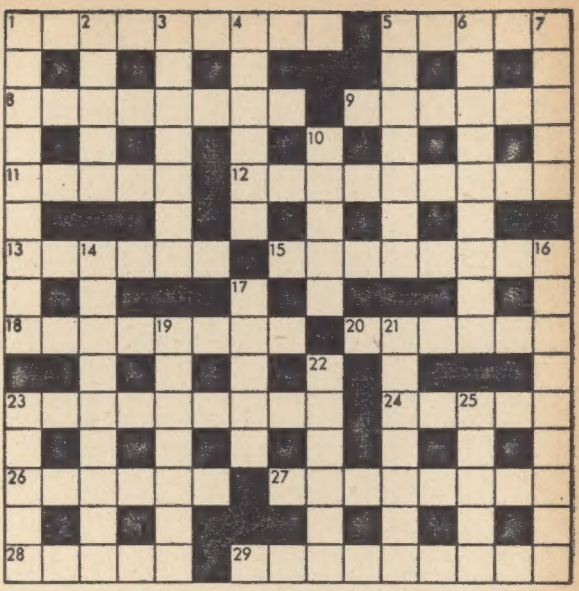

CLUES

Across

1 The casks are capitally swinish (9).
5 The old Norse poet might be akin to Burns (5).
8 A dress tie for the senior woman journalist (8).
9 The military implement has gained a victory at the extremities (6).
11 "Non —— sed angeli" (attributed to Gregory I) (5).
12 The flower of the harlequinade (9).
13 An island songster (6).
15 Six balls precede a music-hall act (8).
18 To shout less loudly is rather cowardly (8).
20 Imprison—in a seabird (6).
23 This game is a trifle to the French (9).
24 Upset? On the contrary (3, 2).
26 Making an effort is somewhat annoying (6).
27 "——ed both the heroes so, They quite forgot their quarrel" (Lewis Carroll) (8).
28 Ran south-east in a muddle; now it's wiser (5).
29 It sounds like a festive frontier (5, 4).

Down

1 Little Archibald is raised to the priesthood (9).
2 In a gong, I get moving (5).
3 Hound—or hawk? (7).
4 Natives of this province are terrific dogs (6).
5 This ship could be useful in the kitchen (7).
6 I'd eat plum—but just look at my size! (9).
7 "—— and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!" (Keats) (5).
10 A hundred to nothing, it's a bit of spice (5).
14 Orangewoman, yet loved by a Stuart (4, 5).
16 A tanner and a half (9).
17 This author should contain many truths (5).
19 More frequently it's not free (7).
21 A cheerful feature, and what makes it so, perhaps (7).
22 Meaner, yet more neighbourly (6).
23 Barrels for archery practice? (5).
25 Musically, it brings everyone in (5).

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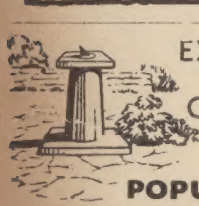

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Student 357/3015: I have had my story accepted by **BLACKWOODS** who are paying me £25 for it . . . *Student* 778/2119: I thought it might interest you to know that **THE COUNTRYMAN** has accepted a short article of mine on an old country custom . . . *Student* 184/315: As you suggested, I submitted the articles to the **NEW STATESMAN.** One was published on the 17th July. I have also had an article accepted by **MEN ONLY** . . . *Student* 181/282: You may be interested to hear that I had a letter from the Editor of **ARGOSY**; they offered me Twenty-five Guineas for my story . . . *Student* 591/287: You will be pleased that my article submitted for my Second Lesson was published in the **DAILY MIRROR** and I received Six Guineas for it . . . *Student* 120/288: I have established contact with the Editor of **PUNCH.** The item was accepted for "Charivaria" and is a good start . . . *Student* 1179/347: I succeeded in getting four Big Game stories into **COURIER** and another about "Shrove Tuesday." Another article appeared in the August issue of **BLACKWOODS** . . . *Student* 1954/157: I have just corrected a proof of my story for **WIDE WORLD**: they have since accepted another and I have sent in a third . . . *Student* 171/162: I have sold my story to **EVERYWOMAN** for 25 guineas . . . *Student* 1106/156: The B.B.C. accepted the script for the Light Programme—fee 9 guineas—after my first lesson . . . *Student* 141/76: The article which I wrote for the Second Test paper appeared in the **SUNDAY MAIL.** Thanks for the recommendation.

ARGOSY for OCTOBER, 1955

THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

ARGOSY

OCTOBER, 1955
ONE SHILLING AND SIXPENCE

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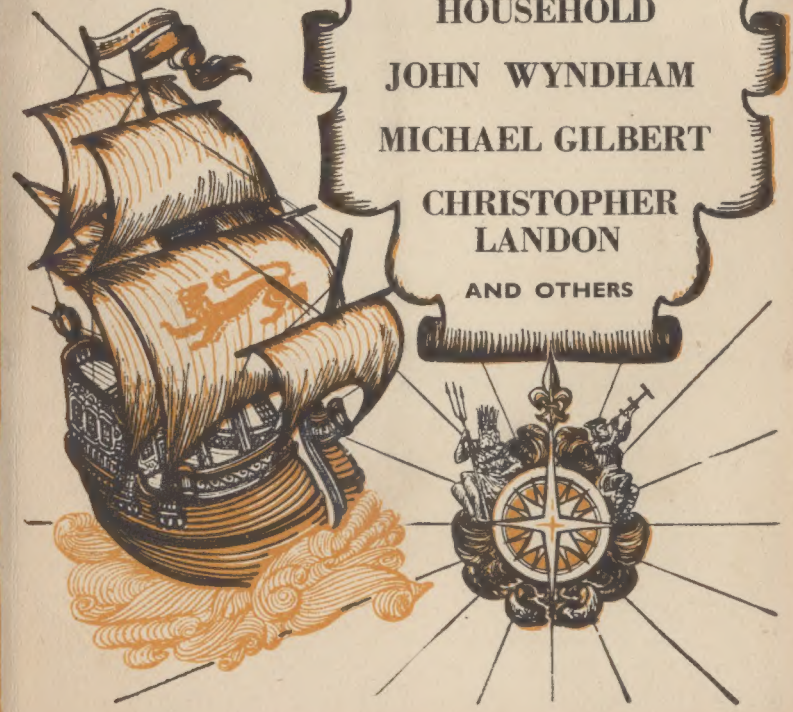
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